

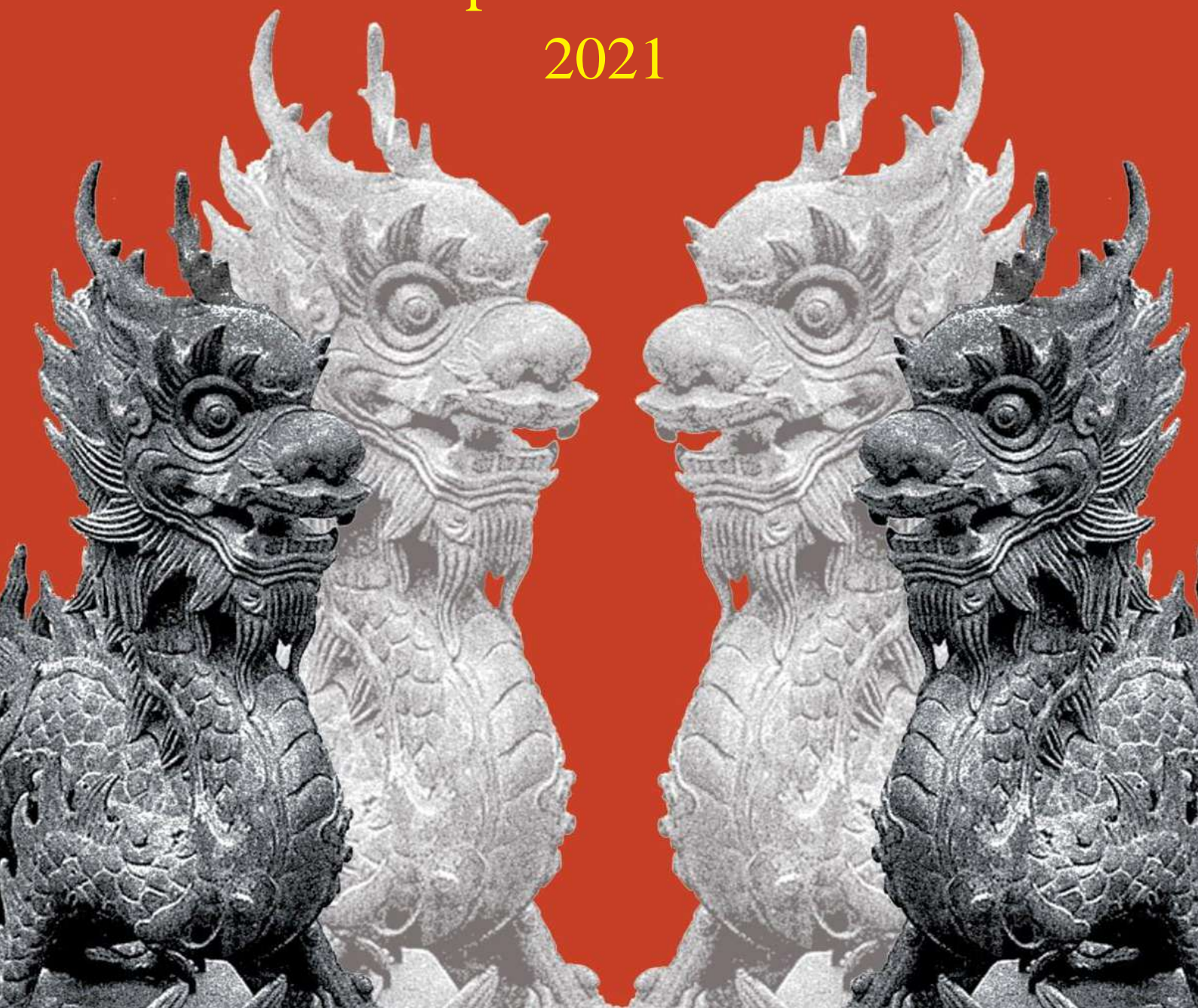
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**ADDRESS TO THE READERS FROM EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
OF THE “RUSSIAN JOURNAL OF VIETNAMESE STUDIES”  
VLADIMIR MAZYRIN**

Dear authors and readers of the “Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies”!

I am happy that during four years we feel your attention and support to our journal unique in its specialty. During these years the journal united a fairly big and constantly enhancing cohort of interested researchers. Of course, Russian and Vietnamese scholars prevail and their proportion is changing in due direction. At the same time, you can see authors from some Western countries collaborating with our journal. Usually, they are well-known specialists. We would like to increase their participation, also inviting Vietnamists from the United States, where Vietnamese studies have reached a high level.

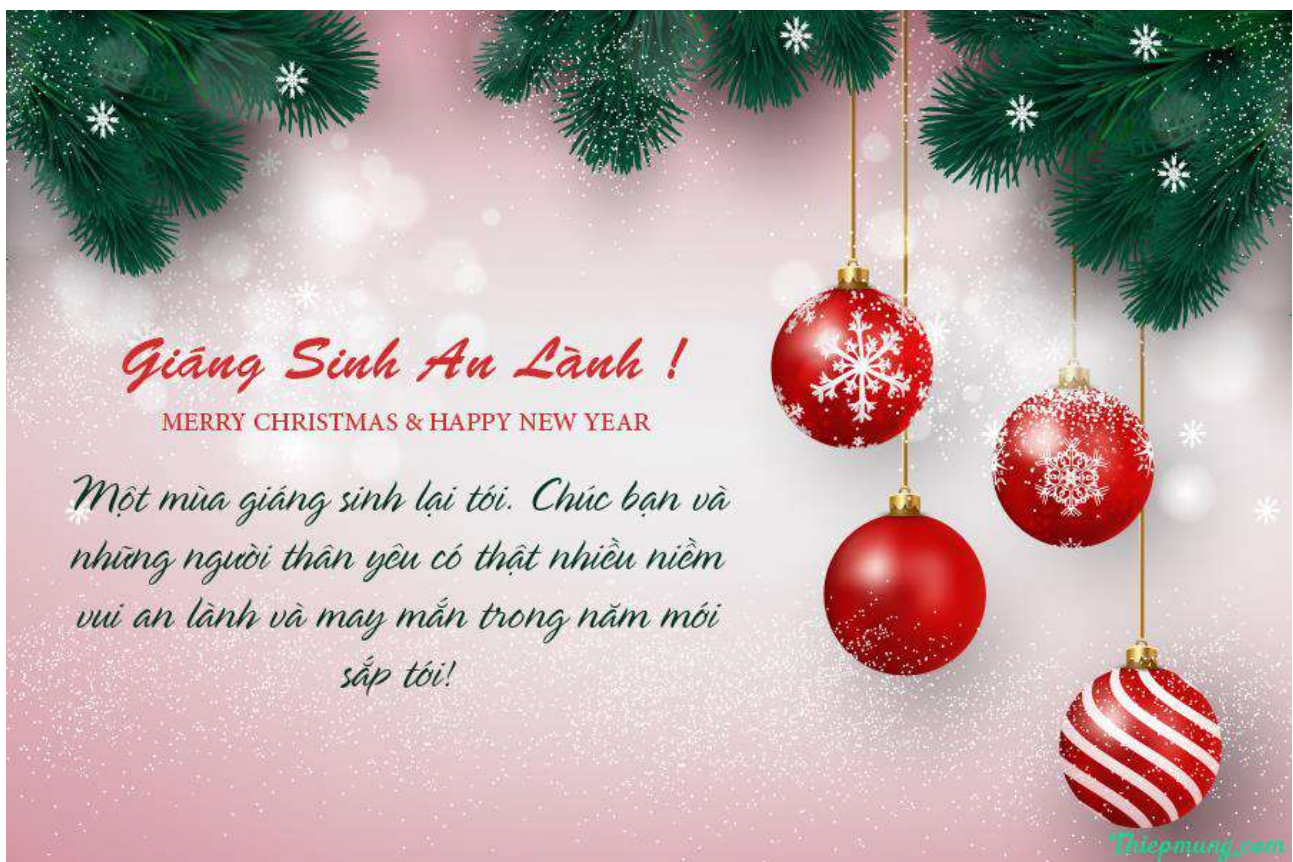
This special issue (the first in our practice), on the eve of a New, 2022, Year, shows that our desires find understanding and support, that the journal is getting its ratings up, and is transforming into an acknowledged tribune for exposing the results of researches. This issue mostly consists of the papers by young scholars from France, where the school of Vietnamese studies has long and glorious traditions. The proposal of our French colleagues to prepare this joint issue shows that they desire to reach a new, Russian and Vietnamese, and, we hope, the widest world audience. Also, Russian readers will have a unique opportunity to enhance their knowledge of, first and foremost, young French researchers and of French current school of studies of the former French colony. In the last decade, this school experiences the revival and prosperity. It is of great importance, that the French school differs significantly with its themes and scientific methods from the Russian school, and this feature is clearly seen through the articles published in this issue. The editorial staff of the journal readily accepted the invitation of our partners and is contented with the results of this complicated work having been done for nearly a year.

The initiator of such an unusual project, which has had no precedents in our branch of knowledge at least in the recent fifty years, is Benoît de Tréglodé, a famous French scholar. He is not only one of the authors of the journal who encourages his students for the work, but also, he could select eight young Vietnamists in his country and helped them to write interesting and varied articles for this issue (another mature expert on economics has been invited by the Editorial board of the journal). Professor de Tréglodé has written the Preface and short descriptions of the scientific centers where these specialists make researches, write dissertations and work; he has made the survey of a scientific conference on Vietnam and Southeast Asia held in Paris. Also, he has made a bibliography of titles on Vietnam, edited in France in the 21st century. Russian specialists will be able to get acquainted with it.

In the name of the Editorial board of the “Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies” I would like to thank Professor de Tréglodé for selfless big work. I hope that our collaboration will soon be properly continued. I wish young French Vietnamists every success in their work and in their collaboration with our journal and with their Russian colleagues.

Such a collaboration appears to be not only useful, but also exemplary. Therefore, we are addressing the representatives of other countries known with their studies of Vietnam to initiate the edition of analogous special issues of the “Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies” reflecting current development of their national schools of Vietnamese studies.

I wish Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all the readers and authors of the “Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies”. Healthy and prosperous New Year to all of you! Dear colleagues, we invite you to publish your articles in our journal. With your participation it will be better, more interesting and will get higher positions in international scientometric bases.



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## WHICH VIETNAM IS UNDER NEW FRENCH RESEARCH TODAY?

**Benoît de Tréglodé**

In the 1960s and 1970s, the humanities and social sciences were largely at the service of an idealised quest aiming at the socialist revolution. In France, academic research on communism in the Third World countries was fuelled by anti-colonial guilt. The change came from within in the early 1980s, when the exodus of Viet Kieu and the security orientation of the country's reunification distracted some of the intellectuals who were “fellow travellers” (*compagnons de route*) from the triumphant narratives about this country in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1983, a book vividly presented the contradictions of this period experienced by specialists of Vietnam in France with regard to their present or past commitments with Vietnamese communist regime. The historian Georges Boudarel mentioned: “This publication is not a crusade, without complexes or taboos. It intends to place itself under the sign of mutual respect, plurality of points of view, coexistence and tolerance of opinions. These are not exalting slogans, nor are they flags to mount an assault. These terms lack panache and hardly rattle in the wind. But they sum up the hard experience of men. We will not hesitate to make them ours.” [Boudarel 1983: 11].

When Vietnam reopened to Western scholars, French researchers were encouraged to go back by the revival of an office of the *Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) in June 1993, after 34 years of absence. A new generation of researchers, I was one of them, claimed the need to do field research in Vietnam, turning its back on past works that was often considered too politicised. In the last thirty years, while a reversal of perspective would have been useful in the study of contemporary upheavals in Vietnamese society after the *Doi Moi*, academic work devoted to Vietnam after the wars for independence has paradoxically become scarce in France. Without war or ideology, the country attracts considerably less attention. It must be admitted that this difficulty in grasping post-conflict Vietnam, a country that is as geopolitically audacious as it is economically active, is only echoed in the slow disappearance of France in its culture.

For the past twenty years, the generalization of transnational approaches in the academic field has been a common practice in France. However, in the case of historiography on Vietnam, with the exception of a handful of largely Anglo-Saxon works, this methodological bias has been slow to take hold. Writing the history of Vietnam invites us to place at the heart of the analysis the question of trajectories and phenomena that evoke the migration of men, the networks of Vietnamese revolutionaries, and the transfers of goods and ideas. This should not be limited to communism alone but should include, in a general way, all Western and then Asian values and ways of thinking, as well as climate change, pandemics, technological progress and the development of trade. In many ways, this perspective illustrates the affirmation of a country that is more in control of its destiny and that has facilitated the emergence, over the past thirty years, of a host of new political, religious, economic, and social actors, whose presence determines the dynamism and in-depth renewal of the society.

For decades, the choice of a research theme in the field of Vietnamese studies has represented an ideological issue in Western countries. There were subjects that could be studied among scholars (communism, neo-Confucianism, culinary arts, architecture, oral literature, popular cultures and the

village world, etc.), and others that were better avoided (non-communist nationalist movements, religious “sects” and revivals, security actors, ethnic politics, etc.). With the opening of Vietnam, French research on the country had to readapt. The turn towards social history and village studies was, however, not unrelated to the encouragement of the Vietnamese scientific community. At the time, the Academy of Social Sciences of Vietnam made the study of the cultural origins of the country a new scientific priority. A large part of Western research has embraced these orientations. Directing the work of its researchers, and of foreign academics who were “friends of Vietnam”, towards the study of rites and customs of thousand-year-old traditions was, for the Vietnamese, tantamount to confirming the West in its conception of political openness. Villages became reservoirs of traditions of a country isolated from the flows of the society that surrounded it. The return to this unchanging past relegated to the background the “new society” of socialist inspiration that was no longer appropriate. Studying the history of communism hung Vietnam up on a past that its present sought if not to neglect – at least to put in the background – what was tradition (*truyền thống dân tộc Việt Nam*) and popular culture (*văn học dân gian*). So, this angle of study could only be commendable because, to put it simply, it brought back an idealized construct. But the “traditional village” of today in Vietnam, like that of the “new communist man” of previous decades, is nevertheless still very much a part of the same collective fantasy and political construction.

It is definitely outside these (maybe already old-fashioned) fixed categories that the question of the study of contemporary Vietnam will be asked by the new generation of French PhD researchers gathered in this issue of the *Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*. In recent years, a new history of Vietnam has emerged outside its borders thanks to the study of Vietnamese language sources, Russian and Chinese, and thanks to the use of archival collections from several countries of the former socialist bloc (East Germany, Hungary, Czech Republic, Rumania and Poland in particular). Vietnamese leaders sometimes fear heterodox historical re-readings that contradict the linearity of an official history that grants the regime a natural place in the genealogy of their power in the face of a changing world. This political strategy can be seen when one observes the behaviour of the Vietnamese elite over the centuries, marked by constant internal divisions, between the Trinh, the Mac, and the Nguyen (from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries), between colonialists and patriots, nationalists and communists from 1854 to 1954, between the supporters of the southern regime and those of the DRV from 1954 to 1975. Given the complexity of these entanglements, we have sometimes confined ourselves to the title of the names alone (Nationalist Vietnam versus Communist Vietnam, etc.). The risk is not for the Vietnamese elite to question its communist identity in the twenty first century but above all to weaken the historical legitimacy of its conquest of power. If the Vietnamese do not expect a strictly ideological position from the Communist Party, they are on the other hand looking for a protector in the turmoil of their contemporary history, in order to manage the relations between the members of the community. By doing so, and this is a reality that is sometimes difficult to hear in France, the older generation, the one that took up arms to liberate itself, is today pleased with the transformation of society, and follows in the footsteps of a large part of the youth, dreaming of material success, and showing little interest in ideological debates.

In this perspective, the works of young French researchers presented in this issue fall into three main areas. The first objective is to write an Asian/Vietnamese history of Vietnam, i.e., a history that relies as much as possible on vernacular sources from a society that was neither thought nor produced by external powers, successively France, the Soviet Union, China, or expressed today almost exclusively in Anglo-Saxon research. The second objective is to lay the groundwork for a history or an understanding of the Vietnamese society that is both global and that takes into account



the diversity of its actors (state and sub-state, political, cultural and religious) without neglecting the transnational dimension of its political networks and the geopolitical constraints specific to each era and country. The third objective is to propose a transdisciplinary reading that takes into account the latest historiographic advances while remaining empirical and in touch with the daily reality of the country. From a methodological point of view, the young authors of this issue all have an intimate knowledge of their research object, which necessarily includes a mastery of the Vietnamese language and time in their research field in Vietnam. This view from the inside allows us to better grasp the social links and the relationships of belonging experienced by the internal actors (State, groups, individuals) through their inscription in a cultural space. How were they articulated to the imaginary space of the nation? An important part of the studies in this issue deals with these traces, these "identity markers", within Vietnam with the modernization of its economic model, the transformation of the rural world, the urban transition, the religious beliefs, and the new data of its civil society or the ecological and environmental transition in its territories.

The first part of this issue deals with domestic and foreign policy. Antoine Lê's contribution sheds light on the strategies of the Vietnamese communist authorities in the run-up to their victory in 1975. The young historian examined the transition of power in Saigon after April 30, 1975 from the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) to the combined Vietnamese revolutionary forces by studying the Military Administration Committee for the City of Saigon – Gia Dinh. His paper provides an overview of both the position of the UBQQ in the state and party apparatus of South Vietnam's revolutionary movement as it was in 1975, as well as an overview of the plan that revolutionary leaders had to take over Saigon in final stages of the Vietnam War in 1975. The second contribution written by Thi Thanh Phuong Nguyen-Pochan, PhD from the University of Paris 8 and lecturer at the Catholic University of the West, studies the same paradox through the state management of social media and online public opinion in Vietnam. The "enemy" is also within and not only at its borders. On the one hand, the study examines a combination of measures implemented since 1997 by the government and three ministries in charge of Internet management (Information and Communication, Public Security and Defence). On the other hand, her study looks into the fragility and malleability of control mechanisms in the current context.

The contributions on the history of Vietnam and the centrality of Vietnamese communist power since the 1950s allow for a better understanding of current societal issues linked to the re-emergence of Vietnamese territory over the last three decades in the context of a reinvigorated economic openness and its repositioning in its Asian environment. Johann Grémont, PhD researcher from the University of Paris and author of his own book deals with Vietnamese foreign policy within a historical approach by analysing the maintenance of law and order in the China–Vietnam borderlands during the French colonial period (1896–1940) [Grémont 2018]. This article aims to analyse how the French colonial administration tried to keep order on the Tonkin border. It explains how this diverse borderland area with a harsh climate and a multi-ethnic population coveted many issues, giving birth to the challenges of law and order on border. Then, Jean-Philippe Eglinger, an INALCO's economist, is interested in how the Government and the Communist Party are looking at the private sector and its contribution to the economy and how they officially intend to use it to contribute to the country prosperity. The author analyses how the private sector in Vietnam is positioning itself compared to the public sector and examines how the State through the foreign investment sectors is actually piloting the private economy.

In the following paper, Clara Jullien (Université Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne) analyzes the trajectories and practices of individuals, in migration decision-making, in terms of risk management



and space appropriation. From an urban geography perspective, she chooses to focus on the final step of migration trajectories, pushing the doors of the renting rooms of Go Vap districts. The conditions and the time of her research have allowed her to access to empirical elements on how this population experienced the first waves of the pandemic and its impact on the Vietnamese economy. Through life-story interviews, this research studies how multicultural so-called “rural migrants” transit from the village to the city, from the agricultural sector to the urban job market. Then Marion Reinosa (University of Paris) in her paper entitled “Building South Vietnamese Delta Settlements in the Whirlwind of Climate Change”, argues for an alternative paradigm in which cities promote and integrate local communities’ building knowledge to enable architectural and urban forms to play a leading role in the resilience of Vietnamese deltaic cities and mitigate mankind’s impact on the environment. Leaving South Vietnam to the central part of the country, Sunny Le Galloudec (University Le Havre – Normandy) works on the French Concession of Tourane between 1884 and 1889. The main point of his paper is to show that a new form of territorial colonial rule was introduced in Indochina, for and from Tourane/Đà Nẵng first, and then in other key points of the Indochinese Union, which was still under consolidation. That is what he calls “micro-colonies”. To do so, he examines the political context during which the French concession of Tourane/Đà Nẵng was conceived, the work and conclusions given by the commission in charge of studying its borders and jurisdiction, and the steps taken by the colonial administration in order to obtain this new conceded territory. Finally, among young French scholars, there is quite a lot of work in the field of religious issues with anthropological or historical approaches. The same pattern is found for other young researchers working in other fields throughout South East Asia. Camille Senepin (a doctorant student at EHESS – Paris), offers in her paper on the creation of *Đạo Mẫu* cult an analysis of the dynamics of the cult of the Four Palaces outside of Hanoi. Camille Senepin is currently doing her fieldwork in a specific locality, the religious place of Phu Day, in Nam Dinh province. She shows in her work the importance of the locality within this cult, and how specific places can create singular discourses about the deities, the mediums and the followers. In her research, Camille Senepin explains how the participants of the contemporary *Đạo Mẫu* cult are creating their own tradition, although influenced by the heritagization of the cult and the successive government directives. And finally, in the last chapter of our issue, Guilhem Cousin-Thorez, PhD candidate at IrAsia (Aix-en Provence– Marseille) devoted his research to the Buddhist community’s situation in Vietnam prior to the crises of the 1960’s. Focusing on the most active monks and laymen, it addresses a decade of their religious activities, especially the misknown creation of the first national Buddhist association – the General Buddhist Association of Vietnam.

What characterizes the great diversity of these nine papers can be summarized by a strong desire to decentralize territorially their reading of Vietnam. While the previous generation of researchers was mainly focused on Hanoi or the northern part of the country – and continued to have an almost obsessive regard for the central state, I confess, – the new one embraces the whole territory, and the most diverse stakeholders. It is probably easier to work in the provinces than it was then. Anthropologists, historians, sociologists, economists and political scientists nowadays make no secret of their interest in different actors active at the margins of the state apparatus. Although this level was for a long time the main subject of study in Western research, this is no longer a scientific reality. It is as if this process of depoliticization of French research on Vietnam continues to progress, influencing even the territories where young researchers are assigned. While the place and role of the Vietnamese Communist Party in society has long irrigated French research on this country, the revival of social history in the 1990s – which was certainly not without ideological ulterior motives – and the

more recent ‘Asianisation’ of Vietnamese society alongside with opening up of the country is pushing the young French researchers towards new territories and new actors, “next to the State”. Unsurprisingly, all of these works are based on a “Vietnamisation” of the points of view, a reading of the country’s transformation paths from the inside. This special issue, in sum, offers a glimpse in areas of the young Vietnamese studies in France that are rarely presented. It was with great humility and pleasure that I accompanied the preparation of this special issue. I hope all will enjoy reading it.

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Le Galloudec



Camille Senepin



Guilhem  
Cousin -Thorez

## SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

### INWARD POLITICAL PROCESSES AND FOREIGN POLICY

DOI: 10.54631/VS.2021.S-11-22

#### PRE-UNIFICATION TRANSITION IN SOUTH VIETNAM AND THE HO CHI MINH CITY MILITARY ADMINISTRATION (1975–1976)

Antoine Lê

**Abstract.** Using materials from the Vietnam’s National Archives Center No. 2, in particular the incomplete series of the Military Administration Committee’s weekly or monthly reports, as well as recently published archival documents from the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN), this paper aims to shed light on the issue of “*Tiếp quản*”, the transition of power in Saigon after 30 April 1975 from the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) to the combined Vietnamese revolutionary forces by studying the *Ủy ban Quân quản Thành phố Sài Gòn – Gia định* (UBQQSG), the Military Administration Committee for the City of Saigon – Gia Dinh.

This paper will *start* by examining what kind of challenge Saigon represented for the Vietnamese revolution and how the revolutionaries prepared to face it. *Second* it will tackle the issue of the presence of Southerners in the state apparatus for transition. *Third*, it will go over the main policies that the UBQQSG implemented, what resistance it confronted and how it struggled with issues of discipline amongst its assigned cadres. *Finally*, the article proposes an expansion of the dates in which the Vietnam War is generally examined by pushing back the end of the periodization to July 1976 and the official reunification of Vietnam.

**Keywords:** 1975, Saigon, Military Administration Committee, transition, Republic of South Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City.

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#### Introduction

When the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) tanks broke open the gates of the Saigon Presidential Palace on 30 April 1975, they were carrying flags of the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLF) /Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG). The belief that the South Vietnamese liberation movement was freeing its own country was to be upheld until the very end. However, in the hour when these Southern organizations were supposed to assume the responsibilities that they were created for, another form of government took over the state apparatus: the military administration committees. This paper examines the following questions: What was the place and the role of the Southern revolutionaries in the taking over of the



city of Saigon – Gia Dinh? Was the city’s military administration the last breath of the revolution promised in South Vietnam by the NLF/PRG in the 1960s or the first step towards the South’s forceful integration under Hanoi’s rule?

The conditions of the military administration were defined in the beginning of April 1975 by the political headquarters of the Party in the South: The Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN). They aimed to rely on the deployment of the military forces of the PAVN from the North and the Southern People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) in every locality of South Vietnam to build new revolutionary administrations. The city of Saigon – Gia Dinh, capital of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), was to be no exception and its Military Administration Committee (*Ủy ban Quân quản thành phố Sài Gòn – Gia Định*, UBQQSG), was made to be one of the highest authorities of the overall process of transition (*Tiếp quản*) in South Vietnam.

Created on 3 May 1975 following a COSVN directive from 10 April, officially led by General Tran Van Tra (Trần Văn Trà), and composed of other COSVN leadership members such as Vo Van Kiet (*Võ Văn Kiệt*), Mai Chi Tho (*Mai Chí Thọ*), Tran Van Danh (Trần Văn Danh), Cao Đàng Chiem (*Cao Đẳng Chiêm*), the UBQQSG’s mission was to take over the city of Saigon and ensure the transition from the defeated RVN regime to the new revolutionary power officially represented in the South by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG).

Recent research on the Vietnamese revolutionary side of the Vietnam War has mainly focused on the leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) [Lien-Hang 2012; Asselin 2018]. In particular, the war’s closing moments in 1975, and the taking of Saigon, have been the object of very little scholarship concerning the South Vietnamese revolutionaries. 30 April 1975 indeed serves as a key date, representing a conclusion for most of the historical works published both inside and outside of Vietnam concerning the thirty-year conflict. The implicit subtext being that through this final military victory, Hanoi was able to secure its power over the whole country and impose its own vision of a long-awaited reunification. This narrative of a Northern takeover of the South by force was reinforced in the years following the war by the accounts of former Southern Vietnamese revolutionaries and sympathizers of the NLF or the Provisional Revolutionary Government for the Republic of South-Vietnam (PRG) in exile [Truong Như Tảng 1986]. A few recent publications in France and in the United States have started to outline the main issues of analyzing the immediate post-war period through the lens of a complete Northern takeover of South [Goscha 2016; Guillemot 2018]. This view that has been further discussed by journalist Huy Đức’s study of the “liberation” published in Vietnamese in 2012 [Huy Đức 2012]. While there is no denying that Northern presence in the South was greatly augmented in all aspects of the administration and state apparatus after 1975, recent findings in the Vietnam’s National Archives lead to more nuanced conclusions as to the realities of the transition period up to the beginning of 1976.

### **Saigon as the Gordian knot of the Vietnamese revolution**

It is worth remembering that the city of Saigon had long been a thorn in the side of Vietnamese revolutionaries. Already during the foundational moments of the summer of 1945, the path to the Viet Minh hegemony over the city had been a complicated one. The Vietnamese revolutionaries, even if they lost control of the Southern capital, never ceased to consider it a major objective of their war effort and always maintained at least a clandestine presence in the city. The fact remains that to the communist-inspired Viet Minh and its successors, Saigon was the embodiment of the Western, feudal and capitalist corruption, the epicenter of counter-revolution. Yet, the Southern capital had only known major combat on two instances since the 1950s, in 1955 and during the Tet Offensive of

1968. But unlike Viet Minh commander Nguyen Binh who argued in 1947 that “Destroying Saigon is a very legitimate and humane action” [Goscha 2011: 159], the taking over of Saigon in 1975 was to dispel the specter of 1968 or more generally the fear of a massive Communist repression. The revolutionaries knew that the whole world would be looking on their first steps after the final victory. Saigon was to be the example, the showcase of the Communist-led revolution to come, and of the peace and ultimate reunification of the country. Keeping up appearances, all the while establishing a strict control over information media both foreign and domestic, was key to the whole operation’s success.

### **Planning for the taking over of the city: COSVN directive No.06/CT75**

The COSVN had already elaborated its own solution for taking over the city: establishing a military administration. On 10 April 1975, the COSVN released its directive no.06/CT75, “on the preparation of the transition process in Saigon – Gia Dinh city” [COSVN Documents, Vol. 18, 2020: 835]. This document was itself one in a series of documents that circulated from the COSVN to the cadres at every level of the revolutionary government and the army to specify the instructions, behaviors and objectives that they had to adopt in the “newly liberated areas” in the first weeks of April 1975. Directive 06/CT.75 argued for a temporary military administration based on the deployment of revolutionary troops inside the city in order to stabilize the situation and secure the transition for a new revolutionary government. It also specified the four missions of the UBQQSG:

1. “To continue to destroy pockets of resistance, to hunt down and completely eliminate the enemy, especially its armed forces and reactionary organizations.
2. To quickly stabilize the situation and establish order and peace in the city; to build an armed self-defense force of the masses in every street, in the factories, and to use the revolutionary mass organizations as a backbone.
3. To gradually restore the infrastructure necessary for people's lives, such as: food supply, transportation and employment.
4. Prepare the conditions for transition to a revolutionary government” [Ibid].

The order in which those missions are stipulated shows that on 10 April, the COSVN was still unsure about what to expect when taking Saigon, and probably considered the possibility of a prolonged urban battle like the one that revolutionary forces faced in Hue during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Only this time, they would be the ones who would have to conquer the city from an entrenched force. On the civilian and political side, the UBQQSG was to work in coordination with the Party Committee of the City (*Thành ủy*), itself tasked with mobilizing the masses around the new regime (Fig. 1). Both organizations were put under the leadership of the COSVN, with COSVN members at the leadership of them. The UBQQSG was also to establish various departments (propaganda, security, civilian mobilization, military mobilization, etc.) as well as other military administration committees at all the echelons of the new state apparatus in 14 urban and 7 rural districts that made up the city then. Military administrations were to be set up at the district, ward, and neighborhood levels [Hồ Sơn Đài 2015]. For this endeavor the UBQQSG was to receive reinforcement from the COSVN who, along with the DRV, would send in 2,820 low- and mid-level cadres of its various committees and ministries to form sub-committees in charge of implementing the transition in their specific domain of activities [Nguyễn Đình Thống 2019:191]. All of these revolutionary agents were cautioned against the “ruses of the reactionaries, and the material luxury temptations that the city offered” [Directive 06/CT.75: 794–795] or phrased in Phan Van Dong’s more poetic way: “poison pills encased in sugar” [Trương Như Tảng 1986: 259]. “Revolutionary and

working-class morals” as “the victors’ strict discipline” were to be strictly upheld by those cadres because of their “high responsibility towards the masses”.

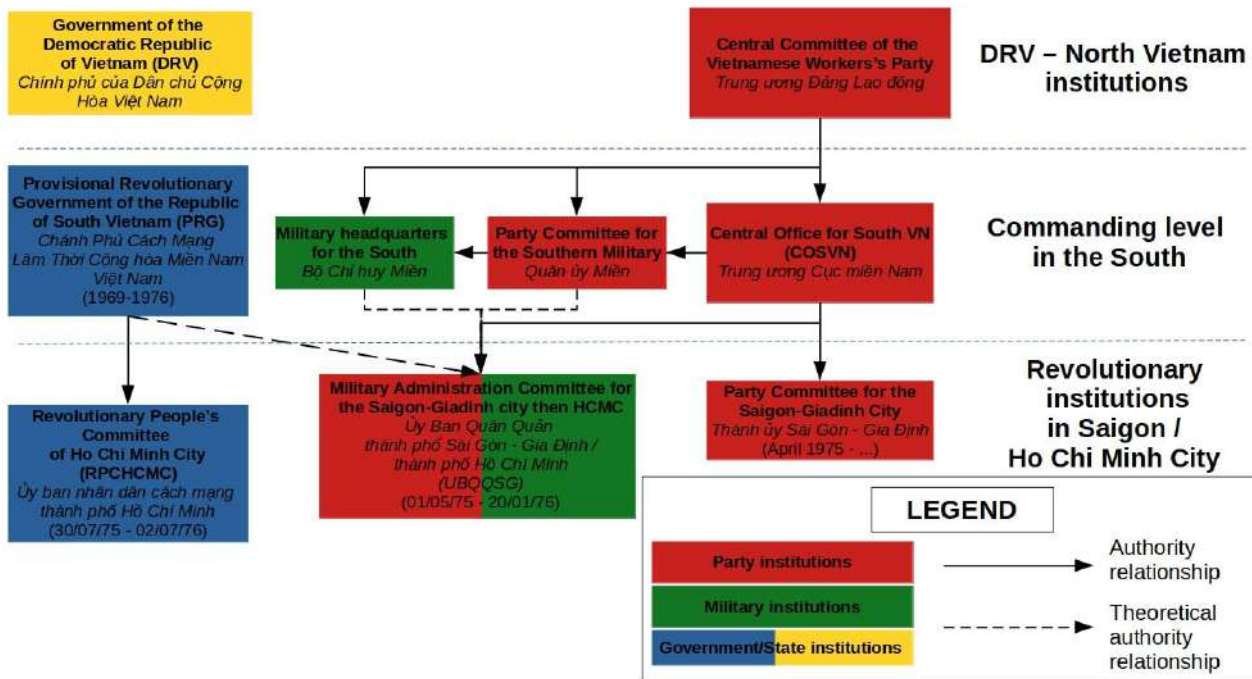


Fig. 1. Organization chart of the revolutionary institutions in South Vietnam in 1975. Picture by the author

### Establishing the new regime among the population and building the administrative network for the city

These 2,820 cadres, however, were nowhere near enough to take over the city. As with the rest of the country, revolutionary authorities in Saigon had to deal with personnel shortages. The COSVN leadership pointed to a solution with directive No.08/CT75 ordering a massive training program for backbone activist supporters (*cốt cán*) meant to act as power relays between the cadres and the masses. According to the COSVN directive, these training sessions had priority over other missions. They were supposed to last three to five days and were aimed at promoting revolutionary achievements and revolutionary morals (such as, devotion to the people and to the Party, exemplarity of the revolutionary agents towards the masses, strict discipline in service of the people, determination to eradicate the enemy, etc.). Moreover, they were to hammer the fundamental principle of the new regime into the minds of these new supporters: “the people are sovereign in the new regime, but it is the worker-peasant class, which represents the majority, that embodies that sovereignty. The government must be that of the working class, under the leadership of the working-class Party” [COSVN Documents, Vol. 18, 2020: 835]. The Party was to be the center of everything, neither the PRG nor the NLF are mentioned in this principle. In a few weeks, these cadres and their hardcore supporters conducted thousands of study sessions, hundreds of propaganda meetings for the masses, public accusation sessions against the perceived enemies of the revolution and war criminals, etc. [UBQQSG Report, 30/04/75–20/07/75]. In short, they recreated a campaign somewhat similar in its means and its objectives to the land reform campaign undertaken in the North from 1953 to 1956. This recruitment effort was so successful that it led to the explosion of the state apparatus’ workforce and structure. The first UBQQSG report from the end of July 1975 states that a total of 1,278 committees had been set up in the city and its surroundings (342 in the rural districts and 936 in the urban ones of which 828 were considered to be secure and stable while 108 had still to be put to the test) along with 3,505 backbone supporters groups spread across the districts. Yet this was only the



beginning, because a few months later in October and November of 1975, the whole administration of the city employed 45,069 people [UBQQSG Report, 14/11–20/11/75]. According to the UBQQSG, this massive contingent of administrative workers went on to represent 50% of all the public servants in the city [UBQQSG Report, 10/10–17/10/75]. Of course, raising the numbers of servants in the state apparatus was not correlated to raising the quality of those state workers, and the UBQQSG continuously reported cases of lack of discipline, authoritarianism, lack of uniformity that led not only to unequal local implementation of policies decided at the central level but also complaints from the masses and perhaps even worse, enemy infiltration inside the state apparatus.

### **A Southern leadership at the helm of the transition**

In the months following 30 April, some Southern revolutionaries were feeling marginalized in the PRG and the NLF according to the former PRG Minister for Justice, Truong Nhu Tang (*Truong Nhu Tàng*). For him, the UBQQSG had become the *de facto* government of South Vietnam, taking its orders directly from Hanoi while cadres from the North were slowly filling every position of power in the new government [Truong Nhu Tàng 1986: 265]. But if that might have been the case for the non-communist members of the resistance, Southerners were still mostly put in leadership positions in most of the governing committees. At the top level itself, of the 11 members that were chosen to lead the UBQQSG, Southerners were the majority [Nhân Dân: 04/05/1975]. General Tran Van Tra from COSVN was named President of the UBQQSG while Vo Van Kiet and Mai Chi Tho, probably representing *Thành ủy*, were named Vice-Presidents along with generals Hoang Cam (*Hoàng Cầm*) (Commander of Army Group No.4), Tran Van Danh (Military Commander for the Defense of the City) and Cao Dang Chiem, a high-ranking officer in the security and intelligence force. Five additional commissioners (*ủy viên*) were also assigned to the UBQQSG: Colonel Bui Thanh Khiết (*Bùi Thanh Khiết*) in charge of civilian affairs; Doctor Nguyen Van Thu (*Nguyễn Văn Thủ*) for Health; Duong Ky Hiep (*Dương Kỳ Hiệp*), Minister of the Economy and Finances of the PRG, and sole representative of the official government of the Republic of South Vietnam; as well Nguyen Vo Danh (*Nguyễn Võ Danh*) and Phan Minh Tân (*Phan Minh Tân*). Of all of these UBQQSG leaders, only Mai Chi Thọ and Hoang Cam were originally from the North.

Not all were military men, revealing that Party membership was more important than military affiliation in the military administration. Indeed, all the UBQQSG leaders were long-time Party members who had either joined the revolution before 1945 or in the early stages of the resistance against the French. They were all men, between 46 and 64 years old with an average of 54 years old and had decades of experience in South Vietnam. Three of them, Vo Van Kiet, Mai Chi Tho, and Nguyen Van Thu, had led revolutionary forces in Saigon with the first two leading the Party's forces in the city during most of the war. Hanoi certainly assumed that these were people that the Central Committee could count on. After all their years of trial, they were now chosen to face a new challenge, one very different from that which they had been confronted with while still a guerrilla force: embodying the Southern liberation and building the next step of the Vietnamese revolution. And from Vo Van Kiet's own admittance: "None of those who took over Saigon in 1975 had any knowledge of state management" [Huy Đức 2012: 42].

### **Northern invasion or southern transition: the military administration's personnel**

Contrary to a common perception, it seems Northerners were not assuming control of the whole transition apparatus in 1975. Former Viet Minh cadres from the South, who were long-time Party members in their 40s were put in charge of at least two of the main transition committees. Both the Transition Committee for Industrial Affairs (TCIA) and the Transition Committee for Agricultural

Affairs (TCAA) were headed exclusively by Southerners who had, for the most part, entered the Party in the 1940s. As the lists of cadres composing these committees were drawn up by the COSVN in April 1975, Southerners were the majority in the TCAA, while the TCIA was mostly made up of Northerners. One explanation for this could be that the North had trained more industry specialists in the socialist ways, while competent staff in industrial matters would have likely been more affiliated with the RVN in the South. However, one fact emerges clearly from a study of the composition of these two committees: the Southern cadres sent to implement the transition in Saigon – Gia Dinh tended to be older than their Northern counterparts and they also had a higher rate of integration in the Party (see Tables 2, 3). Northerners were more likely to be members of the Youth group (*Đoàn Thanh niên*), the necessary step before being granted membership in the Party. Both lists of cadres sent to oversee the transition show that positions of responsibility were all assigned to Southerners and that there were few or no women amongst these contingents. From this sample, it seems that, at least at the COSVN level, the strategy was to entrust the transition process to middle aged, experienced cadres from the South with young technicians or experts from the North under their command. However, this factual situation may have changed over the months after 30 April, since reports of the UBQQ account for the integration of cadres from the Army [UBQQSG Report, 31/05–04/06/75] (which was mostly composed by Northerners at the time) into the administration but also from the *cốt cán* (who were likely to be Saigonese who had rallied to the revolutionary cause). However, having Southerners in charge did not necessarily mean that the transition administration would act in a lenient or understanding manner towards the former enemy capital city. Indeed, being born in South did not necessarily mean that cadres in charge of Saigon may have had their loyalties going to their Southern compatriots rather than to the DRV authorities who trained them. Framing it as the “The old debate between “red cadres” and “competent cadres””, Jean and Simonne Lacouture expressed doubts as soon as 1976 about the capacities of the revolutionary war leaders trained in Marxism-Leninism to take over the management of Saigon in an efficient way [Lacouture 1976]. If, in addition, one considers, like David Elliott, that “it was often the most idealistic of the revolutionaries who were the [first] victims of the war”, the conclusion one logically reaches is that: “Those who survived and held on to the end were often the toughest, most doctrinaire, and unrelenting revolutionary true believers. [...] These were not always, however, the people most qualified to lead Vietnam on to the next stage of its development” [Elliott 2016: 439].

In that sense, it is possible that the Southerners in charge of the transition were also hardcore revolutionaries who felt that they finally had the occasion to punish the city that had defied them for decades. This may also have combined with a sense of self-legitimacy, due to their long careers in the Party, that to some extent freed them from their superiors' directives and allowed them to follow their own agendas.

### **Maintaining order in the city: the UBQQSG against rampant resistance**

The UBQQSG had a part in the two main policies that were implemented in South Vietnam: first, the reeducation program for former members of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and civil administration that processed 443,360 individuals in Saigon alone by April 1976 [Hà Minh Hồng 2019:151]. Second, the semi-forced, semi-encouraged displacement of at least 239,796 people from the newly renamed Ho Chi Minh City to the countryside within either the framework of the return policy (*hồi hương*) or the creation of so-called “New Economic Zones” (*vùng kinh tế mới*) [UBQQSG Report, December 1975]. Contrasting with the image of a blind repression that these policies are often represented with, the UBQQSG showed what seemed to be genuine empathy and concern for the

difficult living conditions of these policies' subjects. In November 1975, the UBQQSG proposed establishing a support group. Their task was to collect medical supplies and clothing in the city and send to the new economic areas in order to improve the disastrous health conditions there [UBQQSG Report, 07/11–14/11/75]. In the same fashion, the UBQQSG insisted on including exceptions, to the categorizations of subjects to be reeducated, while insisting that these programs would not last longer than necessary and they aimed only to give a new start to the former RVN agents.

Table 2. Geographical origins and Party memberships of the cadres assigned to the industrial affairs transition committee in Saigon – Gia Dinh

	North	North-Central	South-Central	South	Unknown	Total
Numbers	96	33	6	64	18	217
<i>Percentage</i>	44%	15%	3%	29%	8%	100%
Party Members	11	2	5	43	2	63
<i>Percentage</i>	11%	6%	83%	67%	11%	29%
Youth group (Đoàn) members	59	16		3	1	76
<i>Percentage</i>	58%	48%	0%	5%	6%	35%
Non-affiliated	29	15	1	18	15	78
<i>Percentage</i>	30%	45%	17%	28%	83%	36%
Average age	27	26	44	43		33
Average age of Party members	36	35	45	46		43
Average age for Đoàn members	25	26		31		25
North is the area above Thanh hóa province; North-Central covers the area from Thanh hóa province to the 17 <sup>th</sup> parallel; South-Central zone from the 17 <sup>th</sup> parallel to the present provinces of Đắk Nông, Lâm Đồng and Bình Thuận; South is the south area.						

Source: Compiled from BS-109, Danh sách cán bộ lãnh đạo tiểu ban tiếp quản công nghiệp + Danh sách cán bộ công nhân đi tiếp quản in HS 73: Tài liệu của Bộ Kinh tế Tài chính, Ủy ban Quân Quản TP. HCM về công tác tiếp quản năm 1975–1976 [List of cadres and leaders of the industrial takeover subcommittee + List of staff and workers taking over in HS 73: Documents of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, Ho Chi Minh City Military Administration Committee on the takeover in 1975–1976], TTLTQGII

This concern for de-escalating conflicts with the population was also visible in the way in which the UBQQSG managed opposition to the new revolutionary government, at least in the beginning. An armed protest, organized by Catholics, that took place on the night of 3 June 1975 is illustrative of this attitude. While the protesters chanted “Down with the PRG, the revolution is not freedom!” and wounded a revolutionary agent, the authorities preferred dialogue and persuasion over brutal repression, arresting only 19 people of the 400 protesters. Yet, maintaining order in the city was still the first priority on the UBQQSG’s agenda and for that purpose thousands of soldiers were deployed in the city at every level from the beginning. Catholics, ethnic Chinese (*Hoa*) inhabitants of Saigon were the targets of a special kind of surveillance. This did not prevent enemies of the new revolutionary regime to engage in violent resistance. As early as the beginning of August, and all through the rest of the year, the UBQQSG deplored numerous grenade attacks on the new People’s



Committees and revolutionary agents all throughout the city, killing dozens of people [UBQQSG Report, 04/08–07/08/75]. This opposition to the revolutionary authorities grew stronger with the preparations for the general elections and the official reunification of the country. Northern cadres, or those who had close ties to them were assaulted in the streets [UBQQSG Report, 24/10–30/10/75], the UBQQSG reported at least two cases of Northern soldiers (*bộ đội*) being brutally murdered in District 3 and in the Cu Chi district [UBQQSG Report, November – 10/12/75]. Meanwhile, protests multiplied in November and December 1975 against reunification. They demanded the end of the Northern presence, denounced the displacement of Southerners and the re-settling of Northerners in the city, and claimed that “The South is for Southerners.”

Table 3. Geographical origins and Party memberships of the cadres assigned to the agricultural affairs transition committee in Saigon - Gia Dinh

	North	North-Central	South-Central	South	Cambodia	Total
Numbers	15	5	3	44	3	70
Percentage	21%	7%	4%	63%	4%	100%
Party Members	7	4	3	30	2	46
Percentage	47%	80%	100%	68%	67%	66%
Youth group (Đoàn) members	3	1				4
Percentage	20%	20%				6%
Non-affiliated	5			14	1	20
Percentage	33%			32%	33%	29%
Average age	30	34	43	41	30	38
Average age of Party members	33	37	43	43	36	41
North is the area above Thanh hóa province; North-Central covers the area from Thanh hóa province to the 17 <sup>th</sup> parallel; South-Central zone from the 17 <sup>th</sup> parallel to the present provinces of Đắk Nông, Lâm Đồng and Bình Thuận; South is the south area.						

Source: Compiled from Cơ quan Nông nghiệp R – Danh sách cán bộ nhân viên của cơ quan nông nghiệp R được cử đi làm nhiệm vụ đột xuất – 23/04/75 – TM. Ban lãnh đạo cơ quan – Nguyễn Văn Tấn in HS 73: Tài liệu của Bộ Kinh tế Tài chính, Ủy ban Quân Quản TP. HCM về công tác tiếp quản năm 1975–1976 [Agriculture Agency R – List of officers and employees of agricultural agency R sent on unscheduled missions – 23 April 1975 – TM. Agency leadership – Nguyen Van Tat in HS: Documents of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, Ho Chi Minh City Military Administration Committee on the takeover in 1975–1976], TTLTQGII

The UBQQSG was keen on not letting the situation get out of hand and set its public security department to work on such unrest. As the following table shows, only in the last months of 1975, they cracked down upon dozens of military cases (seizing weapons and explosives, dismantling clandestine groups, and arresting former ARVN personnel that were evading reeducation and plotting to overthrow the new government), hundreds of political cases. They also went after criminals and

delinquents who tried to take advantage of the underlying turmoil, with the new police forces directing special attention to the increase in thefts and burglaries (Table 4).

Trying to end a thirty-year civil war in a city that housed a significant population that had once dedicated a large part of their lives to actively fight against the revolution was no small matter. However, if the UBQQSG at the top level seem to have privileged some form of leniency in its approach to opposition, first-hand accounts from Saigon inhabitants report local revolutionary committees imposing a much harsher form of punishment and retaliation, seemingly out of the UBQQSG's control. This lead Saigonese revolutionary sympathizer Huynh Tran Duc, faced the numerous excesses he witnessed to ask: "But where are we going if the central authorities are always overwhelmed by the revolutionary committees?" [Friang, Huynh Tran Duc 1976].

Table 4. Resistance activities and infringements on public order in the last three months of 1975

	October	November	December
Enemy activities	571	740	448
Military cases	34	48	15
Political cases (distributing flyers, spreading rumors of fake news, flight abroad)	100	126	84
Public order violations	336	605	351
Theft/Burglaries	179	136	293

Source: Compiled from the data of UBQQSG reports in HS.50: Báo cáo của Ủy ban Nhân dân Quân quản TP. Hồ Chí Minh về tình hình thành phố năm 1975 [Report of the People's Committee of Military Administration of Ho Chi Minh City. Ho Chi Minh City on the situation in 1975], Phòng Ban Kinh tế Kế hoạch miền Nam (BKT Fonds), TTLTQGII

### Keeping control over the apparatus, the cadre discipline in question

Indeed, the other major issue that the UBQQSG had to deal with was maintaining the discipline of revolutionary cadres throughout this period. Indeed, the «poison pills encased in sugar of the South» that the DRV Prime Minister Phan Van Dong cautioned against were not a baseless claim. Cases of cadres visiting prostitutes, abuses of power, bureaucratic overcomplications, and failures to comply with the ideological and moral standards of the revolution were repeatedly brought to the UBQQSG's attention. Yet UBQQSG reports contain no mentions of summary executions of thieves, delinquents or political opponents related in other sources [Friang, Huynh Tran Duc 1976]. One particular kind of abuse was especially worrisome to the revolutionary authorities: the unlawful confiscation of property. As soon as on 1 May 1975, revolutionary agents had started to confiscate the properties of those who had left before 30 April as a way to obtain facilities for their new institutions<sup>1</sup>. These were relatively victimless expropriations at the time, since the owners had left with apparently no plans to return to the country. The confiscation of property was also one of the prescribed punishments for former RVN civil servants and those active enemies of the new revolutionary regime. But these confiscations seemed to have quickly gotten out of the revolutionary

<sup>1</sup> Interview with a former member of a Party intellectuals' cell (*trí vận*) who was assigned the task of finding an empty villa to host their organization.

authorities' control. On 18 June, the COSVN circulated a directive reporting numerous abuses in the seizing of vehicles, electrical appliances, books, and housing all together [COSVN Documents, Vol. 18, 2020: 847]. These abuses were blamed on reactionary elements that had infiltrated the revolution's state apparatus, or on self-proclaimed transition cadres who used their weapons to force the people out of their homes. Both the COSVN and the UBQQSG intervened to stop these abusive confiscations by reaffirming who were the competent authorities to order seizures and under what conditions [UBQQSG Internal notice, 20/06/75]. That did not deter some of the abusive cadres. Some of them even allegedly falsified the signatures of UBQQSG's chief of security Cao Đàng Chiem (Cao Đàng Chiêm) to provide themselves fake mandates to confiscate properties from urban inhabitants [UBQQSG Notice, 19/07/75]. To the dismay of the revolutionary authorities, abusive seizures of property that forced people to live on the streets or in the markets were reported to the UBQQSG until December 1975. That month, the UBQQSG reported 156 complaints, with one case being the unlawful eviction of the agency for the water management of the city [UBQQSG Report, November 1975]. Finally, the UBQQSG decided to start a construction program for new houses in order to stop the confiscations [UBQQSG Report, December 1975].

The response that the UBQQSG adopted to deal with these discipline issues was two-fold. First, the organizational committees of the COSVN and the UBQQSG created training programs for cadres to reinforce their quality and their morals whilst performing their duties. The second solution, as COSVN called for as early as June 1975, was to implicate the masses into forcing the cadres to uphold revolutionary discipline, going as far as prescribing people's trials to condemn abusive cadres [COSVN Documents, Vol. 18, 2020: 848]. In practice, this translated into some self-criticism sessions that took place at the very local level where cadres would go in front of the masses and explain "the negative points of their behavior" [UBQQSG Report, 07/11 – 14/11/75]. These sessions were considered to be a crucial step in building the democracy that the revolutionary authorities wanted, but more importantly they forced the revolutionary agents to stay in touch with the people's living conditions and preoccupations, to remind the cadres that they were serving the people and not to create weak points that counter-revolutionaries could exploit to divide the nation. It is difficult to establish whether or not these measures were effective in bringing back the rank and file in line with the top.

### **Conclusion: broadening perspectives and time frames on the final stage of the Vietnam War**

The return to the civilian administration was planned since the beginning of the takeover. On 30 July, the Revolutionary People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City (*Ủy ban nhân dân cách mạng thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*, RPCHCMC) was created with 22 former members of the NLF/PRG. The COSVN called for the transfer to the civilian administration in the rest of the Republic of South Vietnam in August 1975 [Draft COSVN Resolution, June 1975], but the UBQQSG continued its mission until 20 January 1976. On that day, the PRG ended the UBQQSG's existence and officially entrusted its charge to the newly composed RPCHCMC lead by Vo Van Kiet, along with 15 other commissioners. A Southerner was still at the head of the city's state apparatus to look over the final preparation stages before the official reunification under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on 2 July 1976, but Saigon's hardships were far from over.

After 30 April 1975, the Southern liberation movement and the revolutionary discourse that it carried faced the enormous challenge of taking over a dire situation in Saigon and treating the open wounds created by thirty years of civil war. The UBQQSG was, in the eyes of Vietnamese revolutionaries, the necessary step to stabilize the situation before beginning the process of reunifying



the country. The UBQQSG was, to some extent, the embodiment of the Southern indigenous liberation movement and managed to implement some of the revolutionary policies in the city. However, it fell short on a number of considerable issues like ensuring security and order within the city or keeping the state apparatus and the local under a strict discipline. Even though it seems clear that the non-communist leadership of the NLF and the PRG was marginalized, it is also worth noting that the Republic of South Vietnam was still the official regime south of the 17th parallel until the proclamation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN). While this might only point to a regime that only existed on paper, archival documents show that Southern cadres and Party members played a very important role in the state apparatus for transition. They also reveal that the newly established revolutionary administration did not aim at punishing the South but was rather trying to establish itself in the minds of its compatriots as the legitimate power that had the people's best interest at heart. Despite the fact that the fighting had been minimal after the last days of April 1975, the major questions raised during the war, at the center which was the future of the Southern revolution itself, were still the dominant currents which directed the final stages of the Vietnamese revolution.

It is the opinion of the author that a revision of the dates in which we often bracket the war would be more than beneficial to our understanding of the political dynamics of modern Vietnam. Pushing back the final date of the war period to 1976 and the proclamation of the SRVN would indeed allow researchers to take into account the prolonged existence of the separate South Vietnamese state that the UBQQSG embodied, at least nominally. An entity that contained in itself an idea of the revolution, still within the framework of the Communist Party, but that may have differed slightly from Hanoi's agenda. The fourteen-month period from 30 April 1975 until 2 July 1976 could therefore be understood not only as a period of increasing "Northernization" of the South, but also as the moment when the strengths and the convictions of the South Vietnamese revolutionaries, broadcasted through decades of pro-liberation propaganda, would be put to the test of overseeing a transition in war-ravaged territory under US embargo after thirty years of civil strife.

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## STATE MANAGEMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN VIETNAM

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**Abstract.** The development of Internet in Vietnam since late 2000s represents an unprecedented opportunity for economic growth; it also poses a major challenge to political stability insofar as its development has coincided with the emergence of civil society and the rise of the social media. Vietnamese social media has been studied by many scholars from different point of views. Yet, the organisational side of Internet governance and its inherent vulnerability remain obscure in the literature. Our paper will scrutinize the state management dilemma of social media. We will overview the two-pronged strategy which alternates development with control vis-à-vis social media; then we will examine how several management and control measures are combined and how the boundaries may blur between the political and online public spheres, making the state's digital governance vulnerable and uncertain. Our analysis is based on the state's regulations and information published online by official and social media, and foreign news services.

**Keywords:** social media, Internet development, state control, pluralistic authoritarianism, civil society, citizen journalism.

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### Introduction

Since the Internet came into use in Vietnam in 1997, the country has experienced a rapid growth in the number of Internet users. While there were only 204,000 Internet users in 2000 (0.3% of the total population), this number increased to 68 million in January 2020 (70%), among which 65 million were social media users; Facebook remained the most used social network at 61 million users [Digital 2020: Vietnam]. Vietnam was the third most-funded internet economy in the Southeast Asia after Indonesia and Singapore [The Digital Landscape 2020].

While the Internet represents an unprecedented opportunity for economic growth, it also poses a major challenge to political stability insofar as its development has coincided with the emergence of civil society since late 2000s, and the transformation of the public space by expansive social media uses. Like its Chinese counterpart, the Vietnamese state is confronted with a great dilemma: “to rely on the Internet as a vector of economic development and national power, while establishing a control system effective enough to dismantle the most serious political risks” [Arsène 2012: 291]. But unlike Xi Jinping's China, which by way of the Internet censorship system, called the “Great Firewall”, has taken a proactive approach and implemented an ideological warfare firmly blocking Western social media platforms [Creemers 2017], Vietnam takes a rather ambivalent stance, combining control with pragmatic use of the Internet as a political resource [Bui Thiem Hai 2016]. Instead of blocking media platforms, the Vietnamese government tends to make them align with local rules.

The rise of the social media in Vietnam has been studied from different angles, such as the repression of the social media by the state [Abuza 2015], the social media's empowerment through collective action and social movement [Kurfürst 2015], its influences on Vietnam's elite politics [Bui Thiem Hai 2016], its counter-discourse in ongoing land struggles [Labbé 2015], and its role under

the light of civil society [Marston 2012; Morris-Jung 2015; Vu Ngoc Anh 2017]. Some authors focus on political or ordinary practices of the social media [Mai Duong 2017; Nguyen-Thu 2018].

Yet, the organisational side of Internet governance and its inherent vulnerability remain obscure in this literature. The social media is often considered separately from the sphere of the state and not as a whole that encompasses the political and civil society spheres. This analysis fails to diagnose the state's frailty arising from its own contradiction and the porosity of social media. The social media is sometimes criticized for spreading rumors [Abuza 2015; Bui Thiem Hai 2016] while these are essentially part of the social media game which involves both civil actors and the state players and/or their allies. Therefore, our paper will scrutinize the paradox inherent to the state management of social media. We will overview the two-pronged strategy which alternates development with control vis-à-vis social media; then we will examine how several management and control measures are combined and how the boundaries may blur between the political and online public spheres, making the state's digital governance vulnerable and uncertain. Our analysis is based on the state's regulations and information published online by official and social media, and foreign news services.

## **Development and control of the Internet in Vietnam**

### ***Socioeconomic and technological backgrounds***

On 19 November 1997, the Internet officially came into use in Vietnam after six years of connection and email testing [The Internet turns 20: 23.10.2017]. Initially, The National Administration Posts (now the Vietnam Posts and Telecommunications Group VNPT) was temporarily in charge of the Internet. Since 2000, Vietnam Internet Network Information Center (VNNIC) has taken over the management. Affiliated to the Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC), VNNIC takes charge of allocating resources, supervising, promoting Internet use, and developing national digital infrastructure. It is managing 18 private and state-owned Internet Service Providers (ISPs)<sup>1</sup>, among which VNPT, Viettel and FPT hold over 90% market share [Hé lộ về “làn gió mới”: 22.9.2020].

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) gained recognition very early during the *Đổi Mới* reforms starting from 1986. Government Resolution No. 49, released on 4 August 1993, was the first official document specific to ICT, which set objectives for its development by the year 2000 and recommended a national program with a steering committee to be established by Decision No. 221 on 7 April 1995. ICT has been developed through the training of ICT workers and accelerated applications in public services and state bodies to establish a backbone of e-government.

ICT is today a cutting-edge industry, contributing 14.3% to national GDP and 33.7% to total export value in 2019 [20 năm phát triển: 25.12.2020]. According to *Nhân dân* [Internet au Vietnam: 21.12.2020], “Vietnam has 45 000 ITC companies. The country's Internet economy has recorded a turnover of 14 billion US dollars this year, half of which is due to online commerce.”

### ***Regulation and control***

For the authorities, “cyber-security policy is inseparable from the concept of information security” [Trần Đại 2015: 134]. Cyber threats are not only related to cybercrime but also to the flow of information ICT helps circulate: “The understanding about cyber-security issue thus goes beyond mere technology” [Ibid.]. According to Mai Liêm Trực, Head of the National Administration of Posts

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<sup>1</sup> [www.vnnic.vn/en/dns-vnix/vnix-member-isp?lang=en](http://www.vnnic.vn/en/dns-vnix/vnix-member-isp?lang=en)



overseeing the installation of the Internet, high-ranking officials were concerned that the rapid development of this new technology might spiral out of the state control: “We met with tremendous hurdles because of high-ranking officials’ reluctance” [The Internet turns 20: 23.10.2017].

Since the beginning of the Internet, the government has been deploying measures to regulate and control its use. Decree No. 21 of 1997 gives the state absolute power in management and control and brings all information production and dissemination activities under the Press and the Publishing Laws. Furthermore, Articles 10 and 22 of these laws prohibit information that incites citizens to act against the state; to propagate violence, hate speech, promiscuous life, and superstition, etc.; to reveal the secrets pertaining to the party, the state, defense, and international relations, etc.; to distort history by rejecting the achievements of the revolution and national heroes, etc.

Still according to Mai Liêm Trực, it was from the year 2000 onwards that “senior leaders have begun to change their mind and adopt the credo that ‘management must closely monitor development’” [Tiến sĩ Mai Liêm Trực: 19.11.2012]. This change was reflected in a two-pronged strategy about ICT. On the one hand, the VCP gave the green light to ICT development by enacting Directive No. 58 on 17 October 2000, paving the way for numerous government decisions in this direction.

On the other hand, the VCP requested the state to “closely monitor ICT development” by implementing immediate measures of regulation and control. This principle is put forward in Decree No. 55 (22 August 2001), with a view to “preventing activities that take advantage of the use of Internet to undermine the national security and violate beautiful customs and morals”. It consists in identifying all actors in ICT as well as making them accountable for their activities through administrative and legal constraints. Decree No. 55 regulates the “state-owned” status of IXPs (Internet Exchange Points) – these companies manage the digital infrastructure and provide traffic between ISPs; but also, ISPs, OSPs (Online Service Providers), and ICPs (Internet Content Providers). Because ICPs provide online information (e.g., electronic newspapers, information website), they are subject to the Press and the Publishing Laws. All providers must have a valid license, granted, and renewed by the National Administration of Posts, and later by the MIC.

Decree No. 97 (28 August 2008) goes further requiring that ISPs and OSPs deny access to users who violate the prohibitions; and Internet access points (hotels, cybercafés, and airports) provide dedicated state bodies with users’ data if they violate rules. IXPs must work with the authorities to investigate and deter violations of Internet use rules.

On 17 July 2013, Decree No. 72 replaced Decree No. 97 and stipulated that “Aggregated news coming from various information websites now cannot be relayed on personal pages” (Art. 20) which means tighter government control over personal uses. The Decree details several categories of websites and especially makes a problematic distinction between news websites and personal websites. It requires companies which use the Internet to maintain their servers in Vietnam (Arts. 24 and 25).

The control strategy was increasingly oriented towards monitoring the production and dissemination of information. This obviously required a joint management in information and technology. Therefore, the MIC was created in 2007 after the National Administration of Posts had merged with the Press and Publishing departments of the former Ministry of Culture and Information. The MIC now provides centralized management in the field of ICT.

*The expansion of social media: a turning point in state management*

For ten years after its launch, Internet use was slow to develop and remained within small circles of intellectuals, artists, and pro-democracy activists. Intellectuals and senior state officials, such as Phan Đình Diệu<sup>2</sup>, found new ways to relay their recommendations for reform outside traditional channels, especially on websites held by the intellectual Vietnamese diaspora<sup>3</sup> and their personal blogs. Overseas literary websites<sup>4</sup> breathed new life into the Vietnamese literature with artists and works of art that fail to or refuse to take part in mainstream spaces. The social media landscape would be incomplete without mentioning underground journals and blogs<sup>5</sup> published by dissident groups (Bloc 8406, Democracy Movement, Democratic and Pluralistic Party, Vietnam Path Movement...) and well-known political dissidents (Hà Sĩ Phu, Nguyễn Thanh Giang, Trần Khải Thanh Thủy, Lê Quốc Quân or Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức, among others). From the mid-2000s, websites, blogs and forums have exploded<sup>6</sup>; some have become very influential (Huy Đức, Nguyễn Ngọc Như Quỳnh, Phạm Đoan Trang, Nguyễn Quang Lập, Phạm Chí Thành, Tuấn Khanh, etc.). Since anti-Chinese demonstrations in 2007, some historical studies websites have gained popularity<sup>7</sup>.

Social media developed rapidly during the 2010s due to the widespread use of the Smartphone (97% of Internet users in 2020). *Facebook* and *YouTube* are the most popular social networks, attracting about 90% of internet users; the VNG Corporation's home network *Zalo* comes third with 74% [Digital 2020: Vietnam].

Beyond impressive figures economically speaking, it is worth noting a profound transformation of the online public sphere that has given rise to civil society. At the turn of the year 2009–2010, many information websites were created at the same time as several civil society organizations<sup>8</sup>: *Bauxite Việt Nam* (2009), *Dân làm báo* (2010), *Luật khoa tạp chí* (2014), *Tiếng Dân* (2017), *Văn Việt* (2014), *Việt nam thời báo* (2014), or *Dân quyền* (2013)<sup>9</sup>, to name but a few. These websites have been shaking up the media landscape by developing a citizen journalism that has come to compete with the official media. They actively participate in constructing “public issues” that are at the heart of civil society, for example controversies and demonstrations around the state requisitioning of land in Tiên Lãng (Hải Phòng) in 2012, constitutional reforms in 2013, Chinese oil rig installation in 2014, massive tree felling in Hanoi in 2015, Formosa steel factory environmental disaster in 2016, and the state requisitioning of land in the commune of Đồng Tâm from 2017 to 2020. With the new digital media, the censored voices of the “helpless victims” and democracy and human rights activists have been heard. Digital media use is no longer a mode of action specific to political groups or restricted circles of intellectuals but has become an autonomous information practice

<sup>2</sup> Founder of the Vietnam Computer Association and vice-chairman of the ICT national program's steering committee between 1993 and 1997. His personal blog: phandinhdiieu.net

<sup>3</sup> *Thời đại* (1997), become *Thời đại mới* (tapchithoidai.org) since 2004, *talawas.org* (2000), *diendan.org* (2006) or *viet-studies.net* (2004).

<sup>4</sup> *gio-o.com* (2001), *tienvo.org* (2002), *hopluu.net* (2002) or *damau.org* (2006)

<sup>5</sup> *Tự do Ngôn luận* (tdngonluan.com), *Tự do dân chủ* (tudodanchuvn.com), *Tổ quốc* (to-quoc.blogspot.com), *Khởi 8406 Việt Nam* (khoi8406vn.blogspot.com) and *Con đường Việt Nam* (conduongvietnam.wordpress.com).

<sup>6</sup> *Anhbasam.wordpress.com*, *danluan.org*, *ttx.vanganh.org*, *caulacbonhabaotudo.wordpress.com*, *x-cafevn.org*, etc.

<sup>7</sup> *trungtamdulieuhogangsa.blogspot.com*, *chepsuvietblog.blogspot.com*, *vietsuky.blogspot.com* and *nghiencuulichsu.com*.

<sup>8</sup> Free Journalists Club (2012), Network of Vietnamese Bloggers (2013), League of Independent Vietnamese Writers (2014), and Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam (2014), among others.

<sup>9</sup> *boxitvn.blogspot.com*, *danlambaovn.blogspot.com*, *luatkhoa.org*, *baotiengdan.com*, *vanviet.info*, *vietnamthoibao.org* and *danquyenvn.blogspot.com*

separate from the state and connected to social movements insofar as it has reframed existing networks and elite allies. Rooted in the dynamics of civil society, this information practice seems to allow to form a coalition of different methods of struggle, which could be party-led, confrontational, engagement and civil society approaches [Kerkvliet 2009]. The Bauxite movement is a significant example in this respect. Dissenting social media and some foreign Vietnamese-language news services (RFA, BBC, and VOA) are firewalled, but “many users employ circumvention tools like virtual private networks (VPNs) to access blocked content” [Abuza 2015: 7–8].

Dealing with the social media, Lê Doãn Hợp, on arriving at his office of the minister of Information and Communication in 2007, stated that “like commuters, if the press keeps to the right side, it will be safe and free [Báo chí cần đi đúng: 13.8.2007]. The line between the right side and the left side seemed to blur after the Tiên Lãng case and the arrest of journalist Hoàng Khương of the *Tuổi trẻ* newspaper in 2012 [Tiên Lãng: 9.2.2012]. Instead of that opposition, *Dân làm báo* suggested another between “party side” and “people side”, meanwhile independent journalist Phạm Chí Dũng [2013] noted changes of sides within the official media system.

Although the blurring boundary reflects a more complex reality of the media landscape, the state tends to criminalize offenses arising from the practice of information by introducing new crimes to the penal code such as its Articles 117, 258, 263, and 264. The Cyber-Security Law of 2018 places all “national” virtual spaces under the control of the Ministries of Public Security and Defense; information crimes are considered as serious as security crimes (cyber-attack, cyber-terrorism, or cyber-espionage).

Simultaneously, the state and the VCP consolidate self-censorship by enforcing rules of conduct such as “Prohibitions for Party Members” (Central Committee Regulation No. 47 of 2011), “Rules for the Use of Social Networks by Vietnamese Journalists” (Vietnamese Journalists Association in December 2019) or the “Social Media Code of Conduct” issued by the MIC on 17 June 2021.

### Combination of multifaceted apparatus

The control of social media is not the sole responsibility of the MIC, but largely involves the role of the Ministries of Public Security (MPS) and Defense (MOD). These Ministries coordinate their actions by deploying a combination of multiform measures on three levels: administrative and technical control, deterrence, and propaganda.

#### *Administrative and technical control*

Theoretically, the MIC manages electronic media which are part of the media system and subject to press management rules [Nguyen-Pochan 2021]. According to MIC statistics of 2011 [Danh sách các Báo điện tử: 6.10.2011], there are 25 so-called “pure” electronic media which bear no link to traditional media. These include 9 newspapers and 16 magazines, except *zingnews.vn*<sup>10</sup>. In addition, there are about 43 “hybrid” media<sup>11</sup> which exist both in their traditional version (print, radio, television, news agency) and the electronic version (*Nhân dân Online*, *Lao động Online*, *Tuổi trẻ Online*, *VOV News*, *Vietnam Plus*, etc.).

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<sup>10</sup> Born in 2013, *Zing News* quickly overtook *vnexpress.net* to become the most viewed website in Vietnam. These two sites have a common point consisting in their public affiliation (Vietnam Publishers Association in the case of *Zing News* and the Ministry of Science and Technology in the case of *vnexpress.net*) and their *de facto* private ownership (VNG and FPT respectively).

<sup>11</sup> Two listed media outlets cease to operate: *Sài gòn tiếp thị* (*sgtt.com.vn*) in 2014 and *E-info.vn* in 2017.

The MIC also takes charge of the two information services that are required to obtain a license: aggregated information website and social network. The MIC's statistics from 2008 to 2011 [Danh sách các trang: 6.10.2011] and from 2015 to 2020 [Danh sách cấp phép trang: 28.02.2021] counted about 1200 aggregated information websites; and statistics from 2010 to 2011 [Danh sách Mạng xã hội: 6.10.2011] and from 2014 to 2020 [Danh sách Giấy phép: 31.12.2020] counted about 800 social networks. The actual figures<sup>12</sup> are higher because of a lack of statistics from 2012 to 2014.

Aggregated information websites can relay “public” information with the obligation to quote sources, and to inform about the internal and institutional activities, but they are forbidden from producing information. They include three categories: the official websites of public or private institutions, organizations, or sectors of activity; the electronic version of traditional media which must remain faithful to its original version; and the *news aggregators*<sup>13</sup>, newcomers to the market, most of which belong to private companies. Social networks are regulated as platforms which provide web applications, services, discussion forums and information sharing. Most of them are created and owned by private companies for commercial purposes.

The state management of websites and social networks quickly grew out of step with the latter's rapid evolution. In 2019, the Central Department of Instruction and Propaganda pointed out the problem of “journalization” of websites [Khắc phục tình trạng: 25.4.2019] which produce information while they are not allowed to do so. Consequently, the MIC ordered its provincial offices to temporarily stop issuing licenses to aggregated information websites [Tạm dừng cấp giấy phép: 3.11.2019]. 18 news media including *Zing News* are forced to switch into a magazine format [Báo điện tử Zing.vn: 28.2.2020]. Sticking to the “Plan for the development and management of the national press by 2025” (Government Decision No. 362 on 3 April 2019), the administrative measures seem to fail to keep up with the development of social media. In enforcing the same methods of management as with traditional media, the state largely neglects the specificities of the internet-based social media and networks.

However, the real challenge comes from the use of foreign platforms including *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *WordPress* and *Blogspot*. The MIC's role then is limited to monitoring them and issuing warnings. In case of violation, “necessary technical measures” will be applied in order to neutralize the “poisonous” sites, for example by deleting undesirable content, blocking sites via Intrusion Prevention System or firewall, and cyber-attacking via advanced malwares or other cyber-espionage tools. In 2018, the minister of Information and Communication, Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng, mentioned a MIC's National Cyberspace Monitoring Center which is capable of constantly tracking about 100 million pieces of content per day [Mạng xã hội Việt Nam: 15.8.2019]. *Thanh Niên* [Gỡ bỏ 283 tài khoản: 26.10.2020] reports that about 3000 websites and blogs are listed by ISPs as sites of the greatest concern, 283 fake *Facebook* accounts, 1,888 entries, 154 fan pages, 24 *YouTube* accounts, and 15,115 videos were deleted between 2018 and 2020 for “disseminating fake news and distorted propaganda”.

In combating “toxic” websites, the MIC's Information Security Office works with the MOD's Command of Virtual Space Operations or Command 86 as well as the MPS's Department of Cyber Security and Hi-tech Crime Prevention. Internet surveillance is carried out partly with the complicity of the two internet giants, *Facebook* [Facebook's Transparency Report] and *Google* [Google's Transparency Report], who are forced to remove anti-state contents or block access to user posts.

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<sup>12</sup> The White Book of Vietnam ICT of 2020 (p. 16) indicates the number of 1,760 information websites.

<sup>13</sup> baomoi.com, soha.vn, kenh14.vn, cafef.vn, tinmoi.vn, tintuonline.com, etc.



*Harassment, intimidation, detention, and imprisonment*

Deterrent measures against political opponents are not new. In recent years, they have increasingly targeted bloggers, independent journalists, demonstrators, land rights activists, and defenders of human rights. Many international NGOs' reports [Amnesty International 2020; FIHD 2013; CPJ 2013; RSF 2013] describe how the police collaborate with the judiciary to deploy measures ranging from harassment, intimidation, threat of arrest to detention and imprisonment.

*Struggling to regain control over public opinion*

In 2013, Hồ Quang Lợi, Head of the Department of Instruction and Propaganda of Hanoi City, announced that the city had “900 public opinion shapers” who focused on “fighting the enemy’s distorted propaganda” [Tổ chức nhóm chuyên gia: 9.1.2013]. Four years later, Lieutenant General Nguyễn Trọng Nghĩa, deputy head of MOD’s General Political Department, revealed “Force 47”, a cyberspace military battalion made up of 10 000 state agents [Hơn 10 000 người: 25.12.2017]. Public opinion shapers (*đư luận viên*) are recruited by the state with a view to supporting the regime’s policies, trolling and fighting criticisms, participating in online discussions, using false profiles in order to manipulate opinions and monitor active Internet users, and threatening or abusing cyber-activists.

Drawn from the Chinese model of Internet moderators or “50-cent-troop” [“Chuyên nghiệp hóa”: 11.6.2011], opinion shapers can be identified by their rhetoric inspired by columns from pivot media such as “Fighting against Peaceful Evolution” (*Quân đội nhân dân* and *Công an nhân dân*) or “Protecting the foundations of the VCP’s thoughts” (*Tuyên giáo* and *Báo điện tử Đảng Cộng sản*); cyber-activists call them “red cows” as opposed to “yellow cows”<sup>14</sup>. Some state journalists are also involved in social media like Colonel Nguyễn Văn Minh [Đại tá Nguyễn Văn Minh: 17.6.2021], head of *Quân đội nhân dân Online*. Opinion shapers proudly define themselves as soldiers and patriots fighting against the traitors of the nation and the people and protecting democracy [DLV là ai?: 25.4.2015]. They sometimes overstep their bounds and thus embarrass the authorities. For example, on March 14, 2015, a group of opinion shapers disrupted the commemoration of the Gạc Ma naval battle<sup>15</sup> in Hanoi. Facing the anger from the participants, the city authority refuted its connection with this group which it described as “a spontaneous group” [Nhóm tự xưng “đư luận viên”: 17.3.2015]. Caught up in internal power struggles, opinion shapers are also divided into opposing clans [Trần Mạnh Trung 2014] and sometimes end up in rejection even punishment by the authorities [Nguyễn Tường Thụy 2015; Phạm Đình Trọng 2020].

**Vulnerable state management of social media**

In 2017, Võ Văn Thưởng, Head of Department of Instruction and Propaganda, created a buzz on the Internet with the following statement: “We are not afraid of dialogue and discussion [...] because discussion forms the foundation of truth” [Ông Võ Văn Thưởng: 18.5.2017]. His words provoked numerous comments mixing disbelief, distrust, and hope. Two years later, he made another statement that marked the return of authoritarian thinking: “Internet is an information superhighway. It’s in our power to allow for 4, 6 or 20 lanes, and 4-, 6- or 8-wheel vehicles” [Không cần phải lo lắng: 5.7.2019]. This about-face seems to show that the Department struggles to combine a repressive

<sup>14</sup> “Cow” refers to a person unable to think by himself; “red” refers to the pro-communist position and “yellow” to extremist anticommunist one. See Nguyễn Tường Thụy [2020] and Dương Quốc Chính [2019].

<sup>15</sup> This naval battle which opposed the Vietnamese naval force to the Chinese one in 1988 remained for a long time a sensitive subject in the political agenda of the VCP.

approach with an attitude that is more responsive to popular demands. Nowhere is its hurdle more dramatically in evidence than in the deletion of online articles. The official media outlets have difficulties anticipating the leadership's reaction and confidently discerning the red line that should not be crossed. For example, *Tuổi Trẻ Online* was suspended for "misinformation" in the article "The president of the socialist republic of Vietnam agrees on the need to approve of the law on demonstration", published on 19 June 2018; in fact, the outlet reported honestly and so quickly the words of Trần Đại Quang were censored [Tuổi trẻ Online: 16.7.2018].

Essentially, the vulnerability of state management stems from political factionalism which finds a strong echo on social media. The Vietnamese regime has long been plagued by factionalism which makes it a pluralistic authoritarianism or a cohabitation of the four major currents (conservatives, modernizers, moderates, and rent-seekers) described by Vuving [2017]. From 2012 to 2016, the Internet particularly exposed the rivalry between Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng and VCP General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng in their struggle for power [Bui Thiem Hai 2016]. It also reveals a vulnerable regime seeking to conceal this divide.

### Conclusion

As an extremely porous space for interactions between civil society and politics, social media thus raise multifaceted challenges and make state control mechanisms uncertain. How to ensure Internet economic growth while coping with these new challenges would be a major issue for state management of social media.

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## THE MAINTENANCE OF LAW AND ORDER IN THE CHINA–VIETNAM BORDERLANDS DURING THE FRENCH COLONIAL PERIOD (1896–1940)

Johann Grémont

**Abstract.** The item about border between China and Vietnam is not just a contemporary issue. Its building and its story takes its roots in the past and the colonial period played a major role. This article aims to analyse how the French colonial administration tried to keep order on the Tonkin border. First, the structure of the maintenance of law and order along the border is analysed to better understand how these diverse borderlands areas with a harsh climate and a multi-ethnic population resulted in many issues, giving birth to the challenges of law and order on border. Then, dynamics of cross border criminal activities are studied. The authority of these isolated French colonial troops in the borderlands is usually fragile. In front of this situation, the author will question the colonial administration's response against the threat of cross border criminality. Military actions and police operations are mixed and order and law is kept thanks to an auxiliary force made up of local populations, the “partisans”, that is the real backbone to maintain law and order in the borderlands.

**Keywords.** French colonial Indochina, law and order, borderlands, cross-border criminality, counterinsurgency, ethnic minorities.

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### Introduction

The conquest of what became in 1887 French Indochina started in 1858 and ended in 1884 and it was a discontinuous and harsh one. It took around thirty years to establish French colonial order in this Southeast Asian area due to a strong resistance led by the Nguyen dynasty and support from China. The signing of the treaties of Hue in 1883 and 1884, which recognised a French protectorate over Annam and Tonkin, did not mean the immediate end of the conquest. Following their victory over China in the Sino-French War (1884–1885), French colonial troops had a long way to go to pacify the borderlands in 1895. The pacification of Tonkin had two aims: re-establish order in an area where banditry was prevalent since 1850 and represented a threat to the Delta and its rich agricultural lands; and to protect the Sino-French joint boundary commission, which still had to define their shared border [De Ruy 2018]. French colonial soldiers pursue their aims through a mixture of political and military action. At the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, order is officially re-established and the Convention that Auguste Gérard signed in 1895, recognized the borderline. Gérard wrote: “In the spring of 1897, the Sino-French joint border posts were created [...] the telegraph networks were connected [...] piracy was over [...] the military and civilian authorities began to collaborate” [Auguste 1918: 226–227]. With this outcome, the surveyor replaced the soldier. Many colonial studies still support the idea that the process of colonisation has two stages, conquest and pacification, followed by the construction of the colonial State [Fourniau 2002]. Yet, a survey of recent colonial historiography depicts this period as one of uninterrupted conquest [Grémont 2018]. Many studies about the borderlands in North Vietnam during the French colonial administration are in the field of international relations [Lafont 1989; Nguyen Thi Hanh 2006]. More recently, we can refer to Marie de Ruy [De Ruy 2018] who analyzed the link between cartography and the empire and questioned the construction of the imperial

territories through maps. Historians study also the borderlands from a political history point of view like Christopher Gotscha who analyzed the Southeast Asian networks of the Vietnamese revolution [Gotscha 1999]. Moreover, the borderlands seem to be an area where cross-border illegal activities are dynamic especially smuggling like opium [Le Failler 2001] or human trafficking. Nevertheless, the maintenance of law and order along the border has not been directly questioned. That is the reason why the author has studied these mechanisms in the framework of his doctoral thesis.

Indeed, an effective colonial government rests on a major pillar, the maintenance of law and order to uphold the authority of the French colonial administration [Blanchard, Glasman 2012]. The Convention handed over Sino-French border posts to the military authorities. Besides a wide variety of duties, the head officers of these border posts also had to struggle against a wide variety of crimes committed by people crossing the border, ranging from common criminal activities like theft, raids against villages, ambushes, smuggling to counter insurgency. The police records filed at the Overseas National Archives provide a clear description of the situation at the borderlands. The records also offer an opportunity to contribute to the debate about colonial area borders. This article aims to show how the French colonial administration tried to keep order on the Tonkin border. It explains how this diverse borderlands area with its harsh climate and multi-ethnic population, resulted in many issues, giving birth to the challenges of law and order on the border.

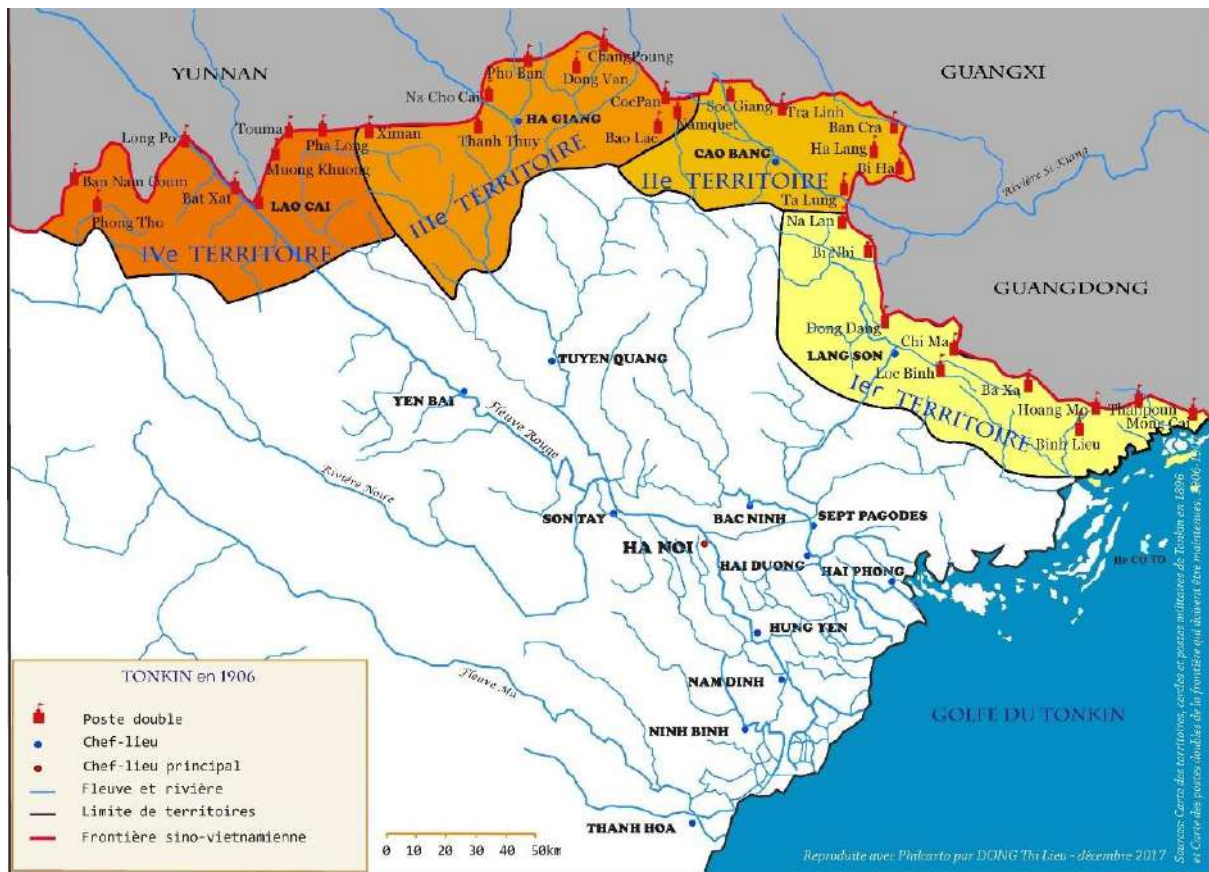
### **The structure of the maintenance of law and order**

Early on, border posts numbered ten<sup>1</sup>. They grew quickly until 1907 when they stabilized at around twenty just before the First World War. In accordance with the provisions of Article 8 of the Gérard Convention, a post officer commanded thirty soldiers. In practice, ninety-one percent of the posts were commanded by officers, usually lieutenants and only a small number of border posts had fewer than thirty soldiers. Nearly 800 soldiers were assigned to control more than 2,000 kilometers of borders. There were also regional imbalances. On the west, only a small number of border posts existed (Fig.1). Although colonial administration had to control the border, regional coverage and the territorial network of border posts was low.

The missions of the officers in charge varied even though their overall charge was the maintenance of law and order. Due to a lack of staff, the French colonial civil servants and militaries had to be adaptable. The French colonial troops had to fight along with their counterparts in China against any border crossing by “pirates” according to the official terminology. The sanctuary offered by the borderlands was a situation that French and Chinese authorities had to avoid. From 1915, the scope of their mission increased and they had to fight against smuggling as well as keeping “Annamite revolutionaries or rebels”, who sought shelter in the southern provinces of China, under close surveillance. Finally, in 1930, a decree provided for the fight against “the human trafficking of women and children, the clandestine introduction of weapons, drugs and all other prohibited goods” [Anonyme 1930].

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<sup>1</sup> Móng Cái – Tong Hing, Pac Si, Li Tsie, Hoang Mo – Lang Dong, Chi Ma – Chi Ma, Đồng Đăng – Nam Quan, Bi Nhi – Bi Nhi, Na Lan – Bo Cup, Tà Lùng – Thuy Cau, Ly Ban – Ly Ban, and Sóc Giang – Ping Meng.



**Fig. 1.** The China–Vietnam border, 1906.

*Sources:* Carte des territoires, cercles et postes militaires de Tonkin en 1896 et Carte des postes doubles de la frontière qui doivent être, 1906–1907 [Map of the territories, circles and military posts of Tonkin in 1896 and Map of the dual border posts to be maintained, 1906–1907]. *Reproduced by Dong Thi Lieu, December 2017*

The Army was in charge of structuring the maintenance of law and order in the borderlands. The French colonial troops assigned to these border posts were not just soldiers. They were customs officers, intelligence agents, and in some cases, diplomats. The border police reports provide information about their daily life. A journalist from the weekly magazine *Indochine* noted that “no one will penetrate the atmosphere of the border posts if he does not pronounce the key word, the sesame word: feudality. [...] It is the accumulation of tasks that really makes the chief officer of the post the lord of the place. [...] He is his own police force, his own security, his own policy” [Anonyme 1944: 8–9]. In fact, the French officers, with just a handful of soldiers, represented the authority of the Colonial State on borders. We should be careful, however, of this hagiographic picture of these Empire builders. Indeed, at the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, the highest civil authorities in Indochina called the maintenance of law and order stability in question. At the end of his term of office, Paul Doumer, Governor General of Indochina, made the bitter observation that the “border is impossible to protect” [Doumer 1902: 160]. His successor, Paul Beau, confirms this comment. According to him, this border is defended in an “illusory way” [Beau 1908: 190]. In the outposts of the Asian French colonial Empire, the Colonial state presence would be finally weak and could be compared to the colonial statelessness concept supported by John Lonsdale [quoted from Blanchard, Glasman 2012: 22]. What then are the challenges faced by these officers to protect public order on the borderlands?



### Border posts faced with major challenges to maintain law and order

First, the physical environment was one of the major challenges faced by the French colonial officers. Most French observers described the area as a tormented and harsh landscape. In the early 1940s, a journalist wrote, “the roads leading to the border post were laid out for cars to pass but not for cars to come” [Anonyme 1944: 8–9]

The Cao Bằng region “is one of the most rugged regions one can dream of” [Anonyme 1932: 18]. In the same way, superintendent Delmas had a similar comment about the province of Lào Cai where “the slightest movement requires an infinite amount of time” [RSTNF 4180, 1934].

Nevertheless, we should be careful to not fall into the trap of geographical determinism. The vitality of cross-border trade – legal or not – between communities that existed near the border was proof that living in a difficult physical environment was not a synonym for immobility. Nonetheless, the colonial troops were generally poorly adapted to this environment and any military deployment took a lot of time

Beyond topography, the harshness of the climate represented a major challenge. The Vietnamese imperial historiography used the term of *lam chướng* [Poisson 2009] to describe this unhealthy air. This climate was deadly for all imperialisms that tried to establish their authority on borderlands. According to Yaobi Zhuan in the Song Shi (宋史, History of Song Dynasty), toxic plants and miasma in the Cao Bang province may have caused the excessively high death rate of Chinese soldiers [Nguyễn Thị Hải 2015]. Under the Vietnamese administration, this geographical area was regarded inhospitable. The conquest of Tonkin was also marked with a high number of casualties due to this climate.

Obviously, the health situation in each border post was not homogenous. In Lao Cai province for example, “the border posts located in punchbowls where the air cannot circulate are unhealthy as Phong Tho. But those of them that are located at altitude [...] are healthy” [Anonyme 1900: 117]. Nonetheless, the overall impression remained a harsh climate. It resulted in a high level of absenteeism. For example, in 1906, “the average morbidity [of the Long Po post located in the 4<sup>th</sup> Military Territory] was 27.77% of the troops” [GGI 40 466, 1905–1907]. This situation led the medical officer of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the French Foreign Legion to advise his leaders “to abandon the post” [GGI 40 466, 1906]. In addition, this health situation was all the more difficult since the medical services did not have enough staff, according to the General Governor of Indochina.

Consequently, the presence of the representatives of the Colonial State on the borderlands would be more symbolic than effective and their visibility in the landscape weak. That was the reason why the commander of the Hoan Mo border post noted that he has to reduce patrols and ambushes “because of the health situation which is very bad” [GGI 65 386, 1909]. Finally, Auguste François, a French diplomat appointed to China<sup>2</sup>, painted an apocalyptic picture of this environmental situation, especially of the Lang Son province. It is “covered with forests, inhabited by few tribes of very diverse and suspicious races. [...] It was occasionally kept under control by small posts of a few men locked in blockhouses, decimated by fevers and who could not establish between them a link enough closed to struggle against the Chinese bands” [Auguste 1990: 158].

Beyond the fact that physical environment was difficult, the French colonial troops were also faced with human challenges. To govern effectively a territory, two main principles should be respected. First, having a thorough knowledge of the local populations. Secondly, people have to

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<sup>2</sup> Auguste François (1857–1935) was the French consul of Longzhou in Guangxi province then of Yunnanfou in Yunnan province from 1896 to 1904.

regard this authority as legitimate. With this in mind, the French colonial soldiers assigned to these “little posts lost in the mountains” [GGI 39 970, 1923] seemed to be deaf as well as blind and mute. The ignorance of local languages and cultures was mainly the cause. The production of lexicons, the presence of interpreters and the knowledge of local languages by some officers qualified this first opinion. In 1914, the resident Lemaire said that Lieutenant Brunet who was in charge at the Bi Nhi border post was an example of a model officer, “a man who speaks Vietnamese very well and knows fluently the Chinese characters and can translate any report in Chinese” [GGI 40 640, 1914]. Nonetheless, the linguistic gap between the French colonial troops and the local populations had great consequence. Although they had to preserve law and order on borderlands, they usually lived in isolation. During the summer of 1925, Lieutenant Marbot commander of Than Thuy border post confessed his difficulties in gathering information on the events taking place on the other side of the border. He noted, “in the absence of any interpreter who can speak Quan Hoa in order to interview peddlers, I cannot collect any information” [RSTNF 1759, 1925]. The fact that the majority of these officers (52%) were appointed for less than a year strengthened this feeling of isolation. Positive actions were often difficult because of a clear acknowledgement of the socio-cultural and linguistically environment, which, in the borderlands, was very complex. Social relations were specific with the predominance of very important clans like the Be Nguyen, who belonged to a branch of the family of Nguyen Trai. The Nguyen dynasty carried on the same policy especially under the reign of Minh Mang. Even if the colonial administration tried to reduce the power of these powerful clans, they remained an important influence in the borderlands. This situation confirmed what Ranajit Guha wrote about India [Guha 1997], a dominance without hegemony although the situation in the borderlands was more complex. In this situation, the border would be less a line between two countries than a moving area. Nevertheless, we should be careful and not only to focus on these police records. It would be intellectually fallacious to reduce a military career in the borderlands to a border posting. Captain Bernard is a good example. His name was recorded the first time in a police report in March 1902 as commander of Soc Giang border post. However, he previously had an experience as commander of the Hả Lang sector. At the stage of this research, our knowledge about these French colonial troops in the borderlands remain modest and we cannot give a closing conclusion. At last, only a prosopographical research concerning these officers who were appointed to the border posts could help us to have a better understanding of their common characteristics.

### **Dynamics of cross border criminal activities**

Castle thieves, raids against villages, ambushes, smuggling, etc. Police reports recorded a wide variety of such crimes committed by looters, rebels or smugglers. However, any scholar working with criminal records should be careful. First, using criminal information from police or justice records, not only in the case of colonial studies, often gives more information about the administration that produced the data than about the crime itself. The second area has to do with the words used by colonial authorities to designate criminal activities committed by bands from China. It fluctuated between euphemism and dramatization. In this situation how to know the truth? Is it necessary to know it? Is the historian’s task to judge the past or to show what happened? That is why it is more important to understand and analyze the way in which the colonial authorities perceived the crime than the crime itself.

The cross-border crimes that colonial authority confronted indicate the porosity of the border between Tonkin and China. The border is more a moving area than a strictly line demarcated.

Thieves were widespread especially castle thieves that are the most and least common. Taking road links between the two countries meant running a risk of being robbed or killed such as the incident on 8 March 1915 when a man with five little girls were ambushed while they walked to the Ban Cra market [GGI 65 392, 1915]. Examples like this were important in the border police reports and were a sign of the collapse of law and order in the borderlands. Villages represented another favorite target. The reasons to cross the border to attack villages were various. Lootings, targeted attacks, revengefulness between border villages. For example, on 4 February 1931, at around 7 p.m, a band of looters prepared a real assault against Na Kang village. First, they placed lookouts at strategic places from which any help could have come. Then they split into two groups of ten people each before looting the house of the village chief, “the only wealthy peasants in the village” [GGI 40 266, 1931] as Captain Delory notes. Then they fled to China. If the purpose of this article concerns the maintenance of the law and order in the borderlands in Tonkin, it does not mean that only villages in Tonkin are under attack. Once again, in the borderlands, the border is a moving area.

Furthermore, smuggling and human trafficking were an economic activity with a strong structuring impact on these peripheral territories. As Eric Tagliacozzo writes about the British and Dutch colonial border in Southeast Asia, it is “two sides of the same coin: boundary production and the boundary transgression [...] that accompanied it” [Tagliacozzo 2005].

Because a part of local populations made profits of these illegal activities, it was difficult for the colonial authorities to fight efficiently against them. Opium remained the flagship of illegal products. Nonetheless, many products cross illegally the border to meet local needs. During an investigation carried out in September 1921 on the market of Muong Khuong by a customs officer, the latter noted “heavy loads of boxes of matches, tins of petroleum, tobacco, barrels of alcohol, loads of cotton fabrics and nets are sold by smugglers” [GGI 39 908, 1921]. Beyond these criminal activities motivated by social and economic reasons, the colonial authorities had at last to fight against rebels located in the southern provinces of China. From this shelter, they organized seditious plots or assaults on Tonkin like the one on 19 November 1927 when Tham Cam Say and 900 rebels organized an invasion attempt though this attack was repelled [GGI 39 944, 1927].

The lack of a permanent and strong representation of the Colonial State and dynamics of crime in the borderlands meant that the administration of these northern areas of French Indochina were far from being a peace zone. The commanders of border posts are faced with major challenges to maintain the law and order in the borderlands.

### **What is the colonial administration’s response against the threat of cross border criminality?**

The colonial authorities tried to prevent and crack down on border crimes by organizing ambushes and patrols. The French colonial troops went on reconnaissance on average lasting a few days per month. Sometimes those increased due to the calendar especially during the Têt when thieves and attacks increased. In April 1928, for example, the soldiers posted at the Trung Khanh Phu border post were on patrol to drive bandits to back at the border while they crossed the border to loot the Dong Sy area [GGI 39 960, 1928]. Nevertheless, this presence in the borderlands is overall limited because of a shortage of soldiers. As Major General Lombard wrote, “the protection given by our border posts is illusory due to the immobility to which the shortage of soldiers forces them” [GGI 40 462, 1918].

To make up for it, the commanders of the border posts also created a kind of intelligence service. These informers were known as “emissaries” in the police records. They are peddlers, restaurant owners and those who worked in cash. In some cases, they were efficient and allowed the

colonial authorities to crack down on crime especially invasions fomented by the Annamese revolutionaries. For example, the suspicious activities of Tham Cam Say, a character between a revolutionary and a bandit, were well known by the colonial authorities because of information passed along. In November 1927, he tried to lead a band to cross the border in order to disturb the public order but failed. And yet, this intelligence service is usually not well considered except during the World War I. Information was often taken at face value. The threat of an invasion of Tonkin was regarded as a likely risk. For colonial authorities, the fear of an invasion was real. The chief administrator in charge of the border police in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Military Territory summed up the mainstream though. According to him, “the bands are led by Annamese revolutionaries with the financial support of Germany and in collusion with the Chinese authorities who promote the recruitment in secret” [GGI 65 391, 1914]. Apart from this specific period, the commanders of the border posts regarded these “emissaries” as suspicious. They regarded them as inveterate liars. In December 1918, the chief administrator of the border police in the Lào Cai province reported that “most of emissaries seem to be the dupe of those who pay them. A few robberies [...] became an invasion of Tonkin planned by thousands of gunmen. Mirages does not exist only at Tarascon<sup>3</sup> » [GGI, 39 919, 1918]. Finally, intelligence activity in the borderlands was ambiguous. On one hand, secret agents represented a major way to prevent border crossings and provided information about what happened in China. Ultimately, the cooperation between authorities on the both side of the border failed because of persistent prejudice [Grémont 2019]. On the other hand, the commanders of border posts mistrust them. They suspect them of passing along fake news and overstating.

In the borderlands, the French colonial troops maintained law and order more as a reaction and less as prevention. In the case of serious disturbances caused by disruptive bands in the borderlands, the repressive capacity of the colonial authorities existed even if they had difficulties to quell them. For example, in 1908, thousands of armed rebels from China crossed over the border to flee the imperial Chinese repression. In Tonkin, they committed public disorders by launching attacks upon villages. In response, the colonial authorities carried out military operations over six months to reestablish order in the borderlands. However, these disruptive times were periods of crisis and were not representative of daily life. Indeed, crimes often went unpunished. The French colonial troops only cracked down directly on crime infrequently (19% of cross border crimes recorded). How then did these representatives of the Colonial State in the borderlands succeed in maintaining law and order?

### **An exit? Having recourse to the partisans**

A decree signed in 1909 created an auxiliary force known under the name of “partisans” in colonial sources. They came from the mountainous areas of North Vietnam. Most of them had experience in local forces responsible for maintaining public order like the Garde Indigène. Some of them belonged to clans, which were required to provide some armed men. The colonial administration also supplied weapons to some villages. It is difficult to know exactly how many partisans were directly armed by the colonial authorities. For example, in 1910 they are 2,500 partisans in the Lang Son [GGI 65 387, 1910] territory and 675 in the Lao Cai province. They could be compared to a self-defense militia, and they appeared to be more interested in defending their land than in supporting the colonial administration. But the French colonial authorities used them not only to defend their villages but also more generally to keep order in the borderlands. They could arrest robbers or go on patrols on the territory of their *châu* for example. These patrols were sometimes commanded by a French officer.

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<sup>3</sup> *Tartarin of Tarascon* is an 1872 novel written by Alphonse Daudet.



Furthermore, this auxiliary force took part in military operations during serious border disorders. In 1908, the chief administrator in charge of the border police in the Lao Cai province acknowledged that “partisans have a major part in the success of the repression and thanks to their ambushes a lot of piracy have been killed” [GGI 65 385, 1908]. They were also posted in permanent blockhouses to make up for the lack of border posts commanded by the French colonial troops such as the Ha Lang and Bi Ha border posts that each had to around ten partisans [GGI 65 386, 1909]. They were also posted in temporary blockhouses during times when the border was under stress. In this framework and as a conclusion we can say that it is possible to reverse the roles. In most cases, the partisans maintain law and order on border and represent the real backbone of this policy. The French colonial troops remain often in the background and take actions as the need arises. This situation is understandable due the lack of French soldiers on the borderlands. If the border drawn on maps is a line, in reality it is more a dynamic area where the intensity of cross-border criminal activities is an indicator of the fragility of the border. To fight against these criminal activities, using locals to keep order in the borderlands does not appear to be an original policy created by French officers like Théophile Pennequin or Auguste Servière. The borderlands continued operating along the policy lines as its predecessor, the imperial court of Hué. This time was marked played an unstable score whose time was marked by balance of power between central government and its peripheral territories. Both pursued a similar goal it means integrating this territory into the national architecture though the Vietnamese administration had never gone as far as posting local representatives of central government along the border. Stated another way, a proximity policy was created where mixed military and police operations are led by local populations and French colonial troops. This foretold the experience during the Indochina wars in the upper lands. It meant the creation of armed groups made up of ethnic minorities and commanded by French officers, which used counterinsurgency methods to fight against Viet Minh. Finally, mechanisms of modern counter-insurgency draw on colonial experiences especially on the borderlands.

### Conclusion

As a conclusion, we can say that after the Tonkin campaign, the French colonial administration reestablished the borderline between China and Tonkin and created a very small network of border posts. But this border was more a zone than a line. Due to especially a harsh climate, a lack of soldiers and a mistrust between the Chinese and French authorities, the French colonial troops had difficulties to keep the law and order along the borderlands in the daily life even if in the case of significant destabilisation they took actions but always in reaction not in prevention. The law and order were usually kept thanks to an auxiliary force made up of local populations, the “partisans”. Smuggling, thieves, raids were indeed numerous. Finally, in the borderlands, repression led by the French colonial administration was a mix between police and military operations and foreshadowed the counterinsurgency methods used during the Indochina wars.

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## SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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### THE ROLE OF PRIVATE ECONOMY IN THE SOCIALIST-ORIENTED MARKET ECONOMY IN VIETNAM

Jean-Philippe Eglinger

**Abstract.** The author discloses, through the prism of Vietnamese sources, the role of the private sector in the Vietnamese economy, showing that it has changed fundamentally during the 35 years of “Đổi Mới” implementation; analyzes its place in the structure of the Vietnamese economy and its evolution, as well as its position in comparison with two other sectors, namely the public sector and sector with the participation of foreign capital. The article, based on official Vietnamese sources, reflects the CPV's view of the private sector and the Communist Party's intention to use it in promoting the country's prosperity.

At the same time, the author introduces the idea that large Vietnamese private groups are “indebted” to political protection by the leadership of the country, emphasizes the existence of a “cronyism and patronizing” approach in relations between them. Thus, the private sector can therefore, contribute to economic development and the creation of economic champions but maybe not to a leveled playing field between sectors and within the private sector.

The paper aims at putting forward the fact that the State is actually piloting the private economy. In reality the Vietnamese authorities seem to adapt to it and take advantage of its development.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Socialist-oriented market economy, private sector (kinh tế tư nhân), non-state economy, economic groups, economic components.

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#### Introduction

The private sector plays an important role in the Vietnamese economy and acts as an engine of economic development, despite the fact that the forefront by the Constitution is reserved to the public sector. The private sector accounts for about 43 % of GDP and absorbs approximately 85 % of the labor force.

However, the declining efficiency and economic returns of the public sector have forced the Vietnamese authorities to reconsider the importance of the private sector and to significantly increase its role in the development of a socialist market economy. The continuing budget deficit has caused the government to encourage greater private sector participation. In recent years, many articles have been published that see the private sector as the driving force of the economy.

At the same time, private sector development is putting significant pressure on the Vietnamese government, calling for more transparency, accelerating institutional reform and improving the



business environment. Moreover, the predominance of small and medium-sized enterprises, which are often deprived of opportunities and incentives to invest in advanced technologies, leads to low labor productivity, which in 2018 was the lowest in the private sector among all sectors of the economy.

A certain problem is also the lack of strong links between the private economy and other sectors of the economy, in particular, enterprises with foreign capital. Most foreign businesses investing in Vietnam use the resources of international suppliers and export their products overseas. The involvement of domestic firms in these value chains remains low. For example, the domestic value added of electronics is expressed in single digits.

To achieve its goal of building a prosperous country by 2045, Vietnam must move towards an approach that promotes a fair and competitive business environment so that a “level playing field” can be created for all sectors in which it can compete.

### **The structuring of a private economy in a Socialist-oriented market economy and its evolution in the Vietnamese economy**

The private economy is defined in Vietnam as a national “economic component” developed on the basis of private ownership of the means of production [Vũ Văn Phúc: 31.10.2020]. The more the means of production are concentrated in the hands of few shareholders, the less the company has a strong degree of “socialization” (*xã hội hóa*). This “socialization” notion indicates that the means of production are owned by “society”, namely the “community”.

The Renovation policy (*Đổi mới*) was launched in 1986 and aimed at developing a market economy in many components operating according to a mechanism Socialist-oriented market economy. The 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of the VCP specified that “the objective of the renewal of the economic management mechanism targeted the creation of powerful forces aimed at liberating the forces of production, developing the market economy with a view of moving towards socialism”. Developing the multi-component market economy was a long-term strategic recommendation to reach the stage of socialism [Văn kiện Đảng 2019: 355].

At the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of the VCP (1986), there were 4 economic components: The National Economy bringing together all the state structures (budget, banks, state enterprises); The Collective economy (Cooperatives); The Capitalist economy (essentially joint ventures between the State and national or other private actors to promote the transition to “socialism”); The Production of small commodities economy. In 1991, the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress introduced a new component of the private capital economy to promote the creation of joint ventures between the state and foreign players. The 8<sup>th</sup> (1996), 9<sup>th</sup> (2001) and 10<sup>th</sup> (2006) Congresses maintained the same number of 5 components with a change of name for the National economy which became the State economy. It had the mission of “keeping a leading role” in the Vietnamese economy. In addition, the collective economy was renamed Cooperative during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Congress. Two components evolved between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Congress: the Individual, Artisanal economy and the Capitalistic economy merged into a private economy. And a new component appeared at the 10<sup>th</sup> Congress: the foreign owned economy. It is interesting to note that this component is distinct from the Private economy, which implies that structures from this component are only domestic-owned structures.

At the XI Congress (2011), small and handicraft production was included in the private economy. Thus, the number of economic components was reduced to four and remained unchanged at the subsequent XII (2016) and XIII (2021) congresses. The components of the Vietnamese economy at the present stage are the state economy, the collective economy, the private economy and the economy with foreign participation. Collective and private forms are often combined into one category

- non-state enterprises. These economic components are made up of companies of different legal forms and ownership which are gradually taken into account in the statistical reports (Fig. 1).

<i>State Enterprise sector</i>	<i>"Non-state" business sector</i>	<i>Foreign-funded Business Sector</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited liability company with a sole 100% state member</li> <li>• Joint-stock company,</li> <li>• Limited liability company whose state capital is greater than 50%.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private company ;</li> <li>• Partnerships ;</li> <li>• Private Limited liability company;</li> <li>• Limited liability company whose state holds less than 50% of the capital ;</li> <li>• Joint-stock company without state capital;</li> <li>• Joint-stock company in which the state holds less than 50% of the capital.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Companies with 100% foreign owned capital;</li> <li>• State enterprise in joint venture with foreign partner.</li> <li>• Other companies in joint venture with foreign partner.</li> </ul>

Fig. 1. Structure of the Vietnamese economy

### The place of the private economy in Vietnam

After 30 years of applying the economic “Renewal” (*Đổi mới*<sup>1</sup>) policy, the private economy in Vietnam has gradually been structured to fit into a “Socialist-oriented market economy” advocated by the authorities. A first milestone, or politically recognized as such, was the enactment of Resolution 14-NQ/ TW concerning “the further renewal of the mechanism, encouragement and creation of conditions for the development of the private economy”. In June 2017, the Resolution 10-NQ/TW was published to “develop the private economy for it to become an important driver of the Socialist-oriented market economy”.

This orientation needed to materialize in operational tools like legal forms or accounting principles to foster. Therefore, the National Assembly of Vietnam enacted the Law on Companies in 1990; the Law on Private Enterprises in 1990 (amended in 1995), the Law on Business (1999), amended in 2005 (providing for a common readjustment between State Owned Enterprises and Private Enterprises) and which was then amended in 2013, the Law on Enterprises in 2014 and then the one of 2020.

According to government officials, the private sector has become the “solid foundation” of the Vietnamese economy [Trịnh Đức Chiếu: 26.01.2020]. In terms of number of companies, end of 2019 [GSO, Sách trắng doanh nghiệp Việt Nam năm 2020, Bộ Kế hoạch và Đầu tư 2020, Hiếu Công: 13.02.2020], the private sector as a whole counted approximately 6 million private structures, and around 700,000 private Vietnamese companies<sup>2</sup>. The total number of these “non-state” structures represented 96-97% of the total number of companies.

<sup>1</sup> Policy of economic “renewal” advocated during the VI<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Registered by the Vietnamese authorities (*Sở Kế hoạch và Đầu tư*).

Table 1. Ownership Ratio in Vietnam

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
<b>TOTAL (%)</b>	<b>99,99</b>	<b>99,99</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>State owned enterprises</b>	<b>0,64</b>	<b>0,52</b>	<b>0,44</b>	<b>0,37</b>	<b>0,31</b>
100% State owned capital	0,3	0,25	0,21	0,18	0,15
Over 50% state owned capital	0,34	0,27	0,23	0,19	0,16
<b>Non-state enterprises</b>	<b>96,66</b>	<b>96,7</b>	<b>96,67</b>	<b>96,86</b>	<b>96,88</b>
Private	10,79	9,58	8,12	6,89	6,03
Collective name	0,13	0,17	0,13	0,13	0,13
Limited Co	65,04	66,7	68,6	70,23	71,2
Joint-stock company having capital of state	0,32	0,26	0,21	0,18	0,18
Joint-stock company without capital of state	20,38	19,99	19,61	19,43	19,34
<b>Foreign investment enterprises</b>	<b>2,69</b>	<b>2,77</b>	<b>2,89</b>	<b>2,77</b>	<b>2,81</b>
100% foreign capital	2,31	2,37	2,5	2,42	2,41
Joint venture	0,38	0,4	0,39	0,35	0,4

Source: Statistical Yearbook of Vietnam 2020. GSO, 2021: 333. URL: <https://www.gso.gov.vn/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Sach-NGTK-2020Ban-quyen.pdf>

The number of businesses reported per 1,000 inhabitants has grown steadily at 11.2% per year from 3.2 (2010) to 7.6 businesses/1,000 inhabitants. According to the General Statistical Office, in 2018 the number of people working in the non-state sector was 45.2 million people, that is, about 83.3% of the population over 15 years old.

The contribution of the private sector to Vietnamese GDP is quite significant. Over the period 2010–2018, the non-state sector contributed to 43% of the GDP. Over this period the private sector increased from 38% to 40.6%; at the same time, the share of the state economy grew from 27.7% to 29.4% and that of foreign-capital enterprises from 15.15% to 20.3%.

Regarding contributions to the State Budget, the “non-state” sector increased from 28.3% in 2010 to 33.2% in 2016, while at the same time the contribution of foreign-owned enterprises increased by 26.3% to 34.4% while the state sector saw its contribution fall from 45.4% to 32.3%.

Since 2015, the “non-state” sector has been the leading investor in terms of total Vietnamese investment, increasing from 38.7% to 43% in 2018. While the investment capacity of the public sector has dropped from 47.1% (2005) to 38% (2015) to stand at 33.3% (2018). The total business sector increased from 21.6% to 25% in the period 2010–2018.

However, according to statistics, the productivity of workers in the private sector remains low, especially that of the individual economy. The average income of workers pertaining to the individual economy is lower than the one of workers in the state sector and in the foreign sector.

Finally, the private sector, especially the individual economy, faces difficulties in obtaining resources for its production activities (financial capital and skilled workers), and especially real estate resources and access to loan.

### The private economy between the state sector and the foreign owned economy

Article 51, paragraph 1 of the 2013 Constitution clearly states that Vietnam's economy is socialist-oriented within a market economy that includes many forms of ownership. The state economy

plays a leading role. Then Clauses 2 and 3 of this same article stipulate that all the economic components are important elements of the national economy. The structures (legal forms) under each of its economic components are on an equal footing, cooperate and engage competition in accordance with applicable law. The State encourages and creates favorable conditions for entrepreneurs, businesses, individuals, and organizations to invest, produce and do business, durably develop industrial sectors to contribute to the national construction.

The private economy stuck between the state sector with its predominant political role but declining economic efficiency and the high-speed development of the foreign owned economy.

The position of the state sector remains important in the economy [Trần Kim Chung, Nguyễn Thị Lý: 30.03.2021] since this component contributed to 30% to the GDP in 2020 while the number of companies amounts to about 2,200 (0.4% of the number of businesses overall). It is present in sectors considered as strategic in Vietnam (electricity, energy, transportation, etc.) via state owned groups or General Companies. This sector employs 1.13 million people (approximately 2% of the Vietnamese working population) and concentrates 28% of the total capital of companies in Vietnam.

Yet in terms of production and business results, the contribution to revenues and profits of state owned enterprises (SOE) have been decreasing. The share of net sales of the state-owned enterprises in 2015 reached 18.2%, in 2018 it fell to 14.5%. The ratio of pre-tax profit of SOEs in 2015 reached 28.4%. In 2018, it stood at 21.2%.

Along with the component of the state economy, the Vietnamese economy has relied on the foreign owned capital sector since the opening and the first Law on Foreign Investments came into force in December 1987. At the end of 2019, Vietnam had registered 30,827 foreign projects with a total capital of USD362.58 billion. The amount of capital spent for these projects is estimated at 211.78 billion dollars, or 58.4% of the total registered capital.

According to the financial magazine of the Ministry of Finance, the FDI sector saw its contribution to Vietnamese GDP increase from 13% in 2010 to 19.6% in 2019 [Việt Tùng: 13.02.2021]. The approximately 16,878 registered foreign-owned companies employ around 6.1 million people, or 11% of the Vietnamese workforce). The productivity of a worker in the FDI sector is around USD5207, a growth rate of around 8.7%/year (much higher than the labor productivity of domestic companies).

It should also be noted that these companies, most often located in dedicated Industrial Zones, account for around 75% of Vietnamese foreign trade. FDI companies are most often implemented in Vietnam for production activities of products which are then exported. They benefit from advantageous production costs and the share of the added value of production going to Vietnam remains generally relatively low (10% to 20% depending on the different products).

The private sector outperforms the state sector in terms of growth rates. The dynamics of the state sector has been marked by a downtrend and slowdown in recent years. At the same time, the private sector is inferior to the sector with the participation of foreign capital (table 2).

*Table 2. Growth rates by economic sector*

Economic sectors	2011–2015	2016–2019
State economy	4,9	4,1
Domestic private economy	6,1	6,9
Foreign invested economy	8,4	10,6

*Source:* [Lâm Thùy Dương: 18.04.2021]

The Vietnamese authorities wish to develop Vietnamese private companies which will be able, through their activities as tier 1 suppliers, to participate in the creation of Vietnamese value in the



production activities intended for foreign countries to create a more powerful domestic force [Nhất Hạnh: 15.11.2017].

Indeed, developing the component of the private economy in Vietnam would have the definite advantage of ensuring the development of an independent and self-sufficient economy, in parallel with the state and collective economy. The individual economy that can “absorb” the mass of the workforce for “usual” economic activities if the authorities make sure to create real equality between the non-state economy and public enterprises, between small and large companies, and at the same time have policies to support small and medium enterprises and create a favorable environment for businesses and start-ups. This is not yet always the case as access to land and bank loans are difficult for structures that have no relations. In addition, to make a sustainable development of the private sector possible, it is important to put in place an effective system for the protection of intellectual property rights.

### **The emergence of large Vietnamese private groups**

In the context of international economic integration and fierce strategic, economic and geopolitical competition, the Vietnamese authorities wish to promote the creation and development of powerful Vietnamese economic groups to defend the country's economic interests. At the 13<sup>th</sup> Congress, the need to develop large private economic groups with high potential and the regional and international competitiveness in a number of sectors and key areas of the economy was once more promoted.

Along with the establishment of state groups in certain areas such as Energy (EVN, PetroVietnam), Telecommunications (VNPT, Viettel), aviation (Vietnam Airlines), the Vietnamese authorities have encouraged private actors to invest, such as Sovico (Banking, Aviation, etc.), Vingroup (Real Estate, Automotive), Sun (Real Estate, Leisure), Masan (Retail), Techcombank, VID Bank (Banking Sector) in order to allow the emergence of private players that can take over from an often poorly efficient public sector.

The constitution of these groups follows more or less a common “pattern”. Most of the founders of these groups were bright young students who studied in Eastern Europe (mainly Russia) before the fall of the USSR. They made their first profits thanks to import-export activities between present-day Russia and Vietnam. Once the profits were made in the host countries, these young millionaires (tycoons) returned to Vietnam to gradually invest in sectors of the Vietnamese economy that were experiencing strong growth when, at the same time, Vietnamese public enterprises were struggling to reorganize. These investments could be achieved only through the presence of a “political protector”. These new groups or private banks invested in the real estate sector, tourism (golf courses), retail, finance, infrastructures. The shareholding and governance of these private groups were shared around a limited number of relatives [Nguyễn Hữu Nghĩa 2021].

This process was carried out in agreement with the national and local political authorities (access to financing by recommendations, access to land, access to public companies in the process equitization, etc.) who saw in these private structures a means of supporting the economic development of the country via Vietnamese structures (in competition with foreign structures). We can now see the Sun group financing and building in return airport infrastructures in special economic zones like Van Don; or VinGroup which engaged (among others) in the manufacturing of cars with BMW license, or even Sovico which ensures that the development of high-end tourism sector (including transportation) remains in the Vietnamese hands. In this process, private actors are indebted for their success to the political decision-makers who helped them “put their foot in the door” through corruption, cronyism, family members.

## Conclusion

The private economy is under close scrutiny by the authorities considering it as a necessary engine for economic development. At the same time, the Constitution assigns a leading role to the public sector, which is gradually losing its effectiveness. The formal importance of the public sector justifies the continuous support to selected state owned enterprises as national champions.

Nevertheless, for several years the authorities and the Vietnamese press have highlighted the important role of the component of the private economy in Vietnam presenting it as a strong “pillar” of the Vietnamese economy, as it plays an important role in the country’s gross production and employment. However, the sector is mostly composed of small and non-competitive companies with low productivity.

In the context of international economic integration and fierce strategic, economic and geopolitical competition, the Vietnamese authorities wish to promote the establishment of powerful economic groups to defend the country’s economic interests. And this defense of interests will go through the establishment of private groups which will be able to take over the growth of a public sector whose economic efficiency remains limited. Hence the emergence of “tycoons” who have been able to invest in strategic economic sectors alongside state-owned enterprises. And these tycoons are often “mandated” by the political authorities to go and develop new sectors or sectors that Vietnam needs.

As Dr. Dinh The Thuan, head of the Department of Socialist Economics from the School of Political Officers stated, “if the Vietnamese economy was a ship, the private economy would be one of its engines. It would decide whether the boat sails fast or slow. Of course, the direction in which the boat is heading to and its destination is another matter” [Đinh Thế Thuan:12.09.2021].

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**NHÀ TRỢ, RENTAL ROOMS FOR FRAGMENTS OF LIFE.  
TEMPORARY FOOTPRINT OF RURAL MIGRANTS IN  
HO CHI MINH CITY\***

**Clara Jullien**

**Abstract.** In Ho Chi Minh City, private complexes of rental rooms designated in Vietnamese as *nhà trọ* form one of the cheapest housing stocks, targeting the working-class, including internal rural migrants. This article combines the insights of both migration and urban studies to analyze the occupation of the *nhà trọ* through the concept of temporariness. It addresses the tensions between present constraints and long-term plans of rural migrants as well as their translation into the occupation of the urban space. The method draws upon observations of rental housing and interviews conducted in two suburban neighborhoods of Ho Chi Minh City in 2020 and 2021, with migrants coming from deltaic and coastal rural areas of Vietnam. It is found that the *nhà trọ* provide housing for rural migrants who are in a long-term temporary situation, within a tight urban fabric with scarce opportunities for access to urban land ownership. Informants have moved to the city up to thirty years ago. Both the move and the duration are explained by multiple factors, from economic and social mutations to environmental pressures on the deltas and the coast. Relative job stability and trust-based interpersonal relationships in the city may strengthen over time, encouraging migrants to stay. Nevertheless, no matter how long they remain in Ho Chi Minh City, many migrants perceive their stay as temporary before a projected return to the hometown, where their permanent residence registration remains. The occupation of the *nhà trọ* observed, their adaptations, and the narratives of migrants reveal the relative nature of temporariness in migration and draw the contours of the spatial footprint of low-skilled rural migrants in Ho Chi Minh City.

**Keywords:** temporariness, migration temporality, internal migration, rural-to-urban migration, housing, low-income housing, Ho Chi Minh City, *nhà trọ*.

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### **Introduction**

Moving behind the streets and alleys of Ho Chi Minh City and entering the private plots of land, one encounters a network of narrow paths. Bordered by invariably identical iron doors, they give access to private rooms organized in ranges. From the main street or alley, these invisible rooms are indicated by board signs saying “*phòng cho thuê*”: “room for rent”. These blocks of rental accommodations built on private land are designated as *nhà trọ*, each rental room being a *phòng trọ*. They compose one of the cheapest housing stocks of Ho Chi Minh City, targeting the working-class, particularly rural migrants.

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In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City and its industrial neighbor, Binh Duong province, attract the majority of the internal migration flows, with in-migration rates of 9.1% and 21.7% respectively in 2019 according to the last national census [GSO 2020: 829]<sup>1</sup>. By contrast, rural provinces in the Mekong Delta region and in the North Central and Central Coast region see their population leaving without much in-migration to balance this trend. In 2019, they had the largest negative net migration rates of the country (-4% and -2.5% respectively) [Ibid.]. To a lesser extent, some rural provinces of the Red River Delta also experience large negative out-migration rates. These numbers are evidence of migration corridors towards Ho Chi Minh City that appeared in the early 1990s (Fig. 1). Li demonstrated how, by that time, the softening of restrictions on mobility and the development of transportation simplified migration, while the increase in agricultural productivity was depriving more and more farmers of their jobs [Li 1996: 4]. These migration flows end up in the rental rooms of Ho Chi Minh City.

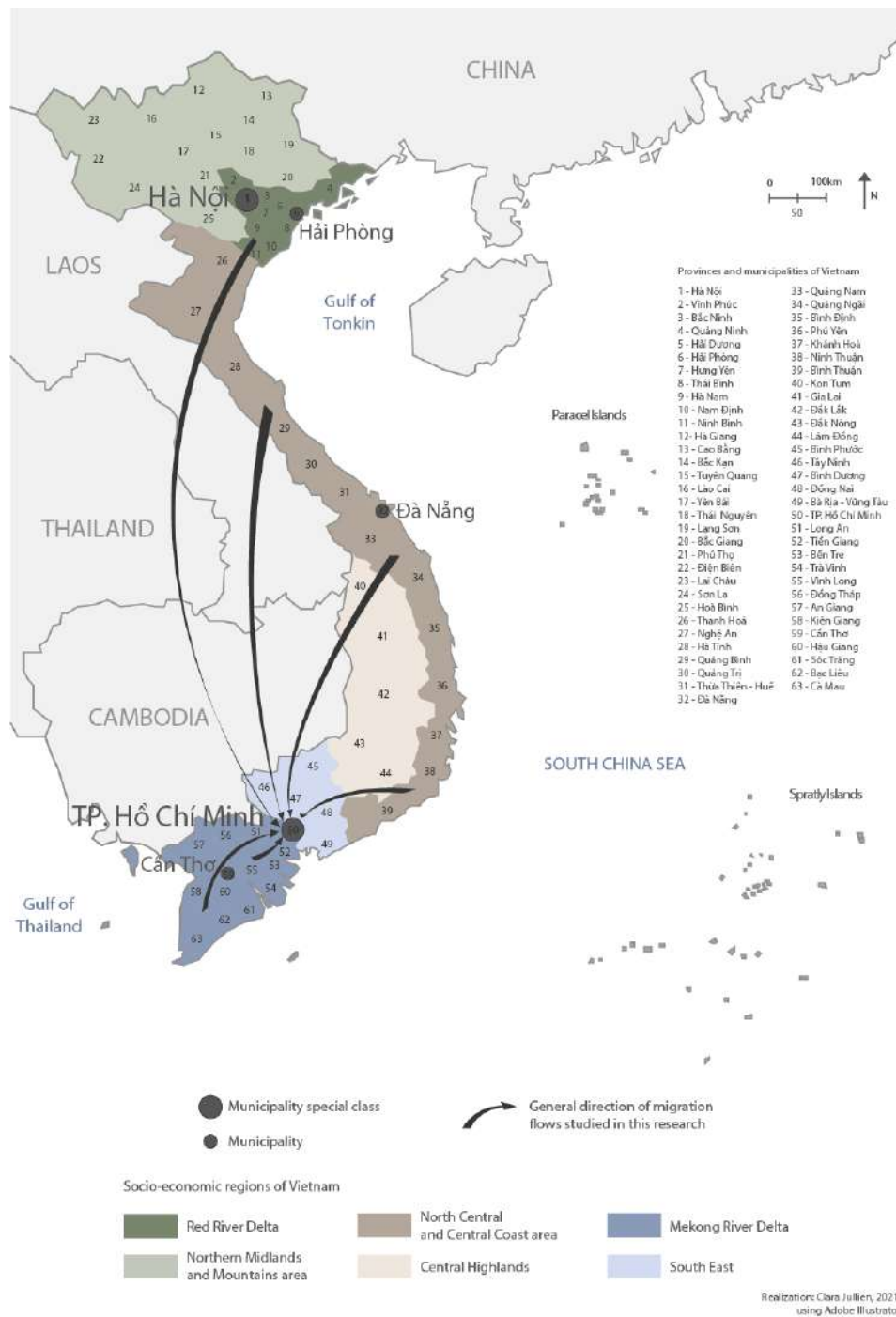
Thirty years of continuous migration raise the question of the temporality and the materiality of these trajectories. Since early occurrences in the 1970s, time has become a major feature of geography, in particular migration studies [Ho 2021: 1]. The same way the spatial turn hit social sciences, the temporal turn hit spatial studies. “The Times of Migration” by Cwerner in 2001 set the first stone of a holistic temporal analysis of migration, followed by literature shedding light on the multiplicity of migration temporalities [Collins 2017; Shubin, 2015]. In particular, McGarrigle and Ascensao, following Ingolds, distinguished biographical/historical time from everyday time, as “in present, in-between and suspended time” [McGarrigle, Ascensao 2017: 79]. This distinction provides some framing to introduce the concept of temporariness. In migration studies, it refers to a temporary state within a migration trajectory, emerging from the legal and political dimensions of migration [Goldring 2014: 219; Robertson 2015: 3], and impacting social inclusion [Basok, George 2020: 3]. It is not defined by a specific length [Wallman 2017: 12.11.2021], but rather by “different degrees” [King 2002: 93], which brings Bailey et al. to talk about a state of “permanent temporariness” [Bailey et al. 2002: 138]. The spatialization of temporariness has been studied in refugee camps [Steigemann, Misselwitz 2020: 1] and at the city scale [Collins 2011: 320]. Besides, the concept of temporariness has proved to be operational in answering the challenges of urban development and post-crisis management [Moatasim 2018: 13; Félix et al. 2015; Tardiveau, Mallo 2014].

Despite the conceptualization of time in migration being developed mostly in international migration studies, a renewed curiosity for the temporality of internal migration is rising, in particular regarding environment-related migration [Kabir et al. 2018] and public space use [Tan 2020]. Vietnam is no exception, and studies on internal migration have already mentioned some aspects of temporality. Several works decoded the legal temporary status of rural migrants in Vietnamese cities [Nguyen Thi Thieng, Luu Bich Ngoc 2016: 162; Gibert 2014: 226; Pulliat 2013: 94]. The topic of temporality has also been discussed regarding return mobility [Agergaard, Vu Thi Thao 2011: 418] and return migration [Nguyen Loc Duc et al. 2017: 2]. Finally, considering time perception, Lainez proposed a reflection over the “regime of present-ness” that characterizes the temporalities of precarious and marginal sex workers in the Mekong Delta, including migrants [Lainez 2018: 3]. In

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<sup>1</sup> The in-migration and out-migration rates of a territorial unit reflect the number of people from other territorial units who immigrate to and emigrate from that territorial unit in proportion to the population of that territorial unit. These numbers include only official internal migrants, defined as residents of a specific administrative unit, who lived in a different administrative unit five years earlier, and aged 5 or older at the time of census enumeration [GSO, UNFPA 2010: 75]. The actual share of migrants in the population of Ho Chi Minh City is likely to be higher.

parallel, studies have used time as the main interpretation grid of the Vietnamese city. Harms offered an analysis of the temporality of eviction [Harms 2013] while Gibert-Flutre developed a methodology to address the rhythm of the city emerging from the everyday time of individuals [Gibert-Flutre 2021].



**Fig.1.** Contemporary migration flows from deltaic and coastal areas of Vietnam to Ho Chi Minh City studied in this research.

*Map by the author, 2021, made with Adobe Illustrator*

This article falls within the continuity of this literature on temporality. A gap remains to be filled by developing a time perspective at the junction between migration studies and urban studies in a Vietnamese context. The author studies the case of internal rural migrants in Ho Chi Minh City

from a spatial and temporal perspective, with a focus on housing practices, at the core of their footprint in the urban area. The author builds on the concept of temporariness to analyze the rental rooms' development and occupation. Behind the doors of the *nhà trọ*, the daily routines and struggles of the migrants collide with long-term family trajectories. Many may stay in Ho Chi Minh City for several years, up to several decades. In doing so, they turn the *nhà trọ* into long-term accommodations. How does the combination of present constraints and long-term plans translate into the rural migrants' occupation of urban space? Confronting biographical time and everyday time, the author questions the time of presence of rural migrants in the city and its translation into the urban fabric.

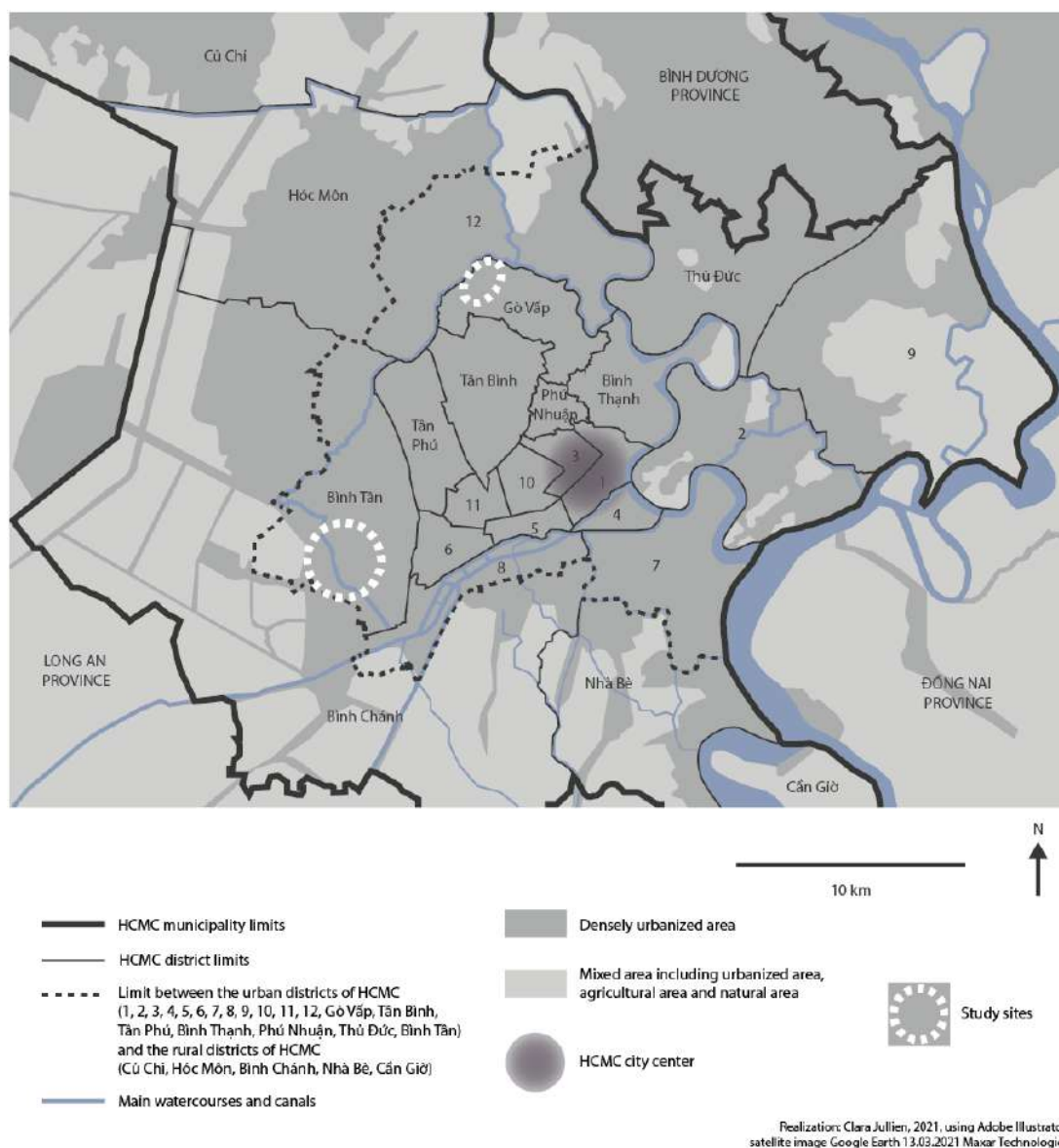
This article draws upon observations of rental housing and a corpus of qualitative interviews conducted with around 80 rural migrants in Ho Chi Minh City between June 2020 and May 2021. The informants came mostly from the Mekong Delta, the central coast of the country, and the Red River Delta. The life story interviews aimed at redrawing their personal migration paths. This fieldwork has been conducted in the framework of a PhD research focusing on the migration trajectories of rural migrants from coastal and deltaic areas of Vietnam to Ho Chi Minh City, in a context of environmental changes. This preliminary article is based on the first phase of the research. The data processing is still in progress.

The research was conducted on two sites located in the western periphery of Ho Chi Minh City, in Go Vap and Binh Tan districts (Fig. 2). Go Vap district experienced its fastest development during the 1990s and the 2000s, and remains an attractive area today, with a high density of population (35,000 hab/km<sup>2</sup> in 2019) [PSO HCMC 2019: 47]. Binh Tan district has grown more recently, making it the most populated district of Ho Chi Minh City in 2019 with a relatively lower density (15,000 hab/km<sup>2</sup> in 2019) [Ibid.]. Go Vap district has a mixed economy including a growing service sector and industries, which employ thousands of rural migrants living in *nhà trọ*. It also attracts Ho Chi Minh City residents seeking for properties, and investors developing high-standard residential projects. By contrast, the economic profile of the area studied in Binh Tan district is more homogeneous, with big industrial sites, and a large number of *nhà trọ*.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: first, the author describes the *nhà trọ* housing stock and how it fits into the overall housing market of Ho Chi Minh City as an accessible housing option for rural migrants. Then, the author discusses how the *nhà trọ* turn into long-term accommodations.

### ***Nhà trọ*, housing stock accessible to rural migrants**

The *nhà trọ* occupied by rural migrants are characterized by their affordability, simplicity and informality, which theoretically position them towards the short-term side of the housing spectrum. They compose the main housing stock occupied by the migrants in the studied areas. They are standardized, concrete, private rental rooms distributed along ranges: usually between 8 and 15 m<sup>2</sup>, sometimes adding a mezzanine floor, most of the time with very little light, ventilation and soundproofing. Most of the housing visited include a tiny and basic private bathroom. The cheapest



**Fig. 2.** Location of the study sites in Go Vap and Binh Tan districts, Ho Chi Minh City.

*Map by the author, 2021, made with Adobe Illustrator, satellite image Google Earth 13.03.2021*

ones share a communal bathroom outside. Rooms do not include any furniture or equipment initially. Given the situation of many rooms at ground level and the poor quality of construction materials, considering the growing flood risk in Ho Chi Minh City, the likelihood of flooding is concerning. Basic adaptation tactics to flooding are observed, such as putting plastic tarp on the door during rainy season (Fig.3). Based on the classification of the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, the rental rooms enter the category of semi-permanent housing, in particular due to the composition of the roof often made of steel sheets [UN-Habitat 2014: 44].





**Fig. 3.** Ranges of rental rooms in Go Vap district, Ho Chi Minh City. *Photo by the author, June 2020*

Tenants rent the rooms on a monthly basis. For the *nhà trọ* observed in the study sites, the rental price is usually set between VND 0.9 and 2.5 million (around USD 40–110), depending on the standard of the room. A few bigger and more expensive rooms have been found. Comfort criteria include surface area, natural light, condition, and location. Housing located in a street is more expensive than housing in an alley. Electricity and water fees are to be added, based on the rate applied to this specific housing and the consumption of the tenants, totaling a few hundred thousand Vietnamese dong. The amount dedicated to housing usually ranges from VND 1 to 3 million (USD 45–135), so that it fits into the budget of the informants who commonly earn between VND 4 and 8 million per person per month (USD 175–355). On the study sites, the most common cases of cohabitation are married couples, often with children, sometimes two roommates, and rarely one single tenant.

Besides the *nhà trọ*, cheaper accommodations are accessible to rural migrants, all of them designed to be temporary. Many factories offer full-board dormitories for a very low rent. Dorms, however, are not accessible to couples; therefore, they might be an option for single migrants when they first arrive, before migrant couples move to a *phòng trọ* in the next step of a longer housing path. Construction workers often stay in temporary shelters on the construction sites. Migrants can also rent a place in a shared room with others, ten or more people, on a nightly basis, for a very cheap rent. Finally, some migrants squat in abandoned buildings for free, like two ladies interviewed. Dorms, shelters, shared rooms and squats all belong to the realm of temporariness.

Currently, the *nhà trọ* housing stock provides a major supply of accessible housing in Ho Chi Minh City, not only for rural migrants but for the urban working class in general, and for anyone in need of a temporary solution. These rental rooms are common all across Ho Chi Minh City and exist

in a wide range of standings and prices. Vietnamese cities suffer from an insufficient stock of decent small size housing accessible to low-income households [Waibel et al. 2007], especially since social housing is very limited [The World Bank, IBRD 2020: 85; Quertamp et al. 2014: 89]. According to the national census of 2019, only 21.1% of households in urban areas were renting their accommodation nationwide, and 33.8% of households in urban areas in Ho Chi Minh City [GSO 2020: 634]. But, compared to twenty or thirty years ago, Ho Chi Minh City's housing market prices make it challenging to access ownership in the city. The attractiveness of the city and the scarcity of land available have led to an on-going increase in land prices, strengthened by speculation mechanisms. The speculation of investors over transactions of properties deprived of full title generated a “bubble” in Ho Chi Minh City's housing market [Truong Thien Thu, Perera 2011: 134]. In this context, for low-skilled rural migrants, the perspective of securing permanent access to land in the city remains scarce<sup>2</sup>. In areas such as Go Vap and Binh Tan districts, which used to be the margins of the city, land owners saw the opportunity to make a profit from their plot of land, especially after their classification switched from rural to urban, while meeting the constantly growing demand for cheap housing. The *nhà trọ* are part of the vast informal self-built housing stock of Ho Chi Minh City, along with owner-occupied family residences [UN-Habitat 2014: 51]. Over the past decade, the Vietnamese government has committed to develop housing programs for industrial sector workers and students, and social housing for low-income households in order to fill the gap of the housing market<sup>3</sup>. However, for now, the *nhà trọ* stands out as one of the most affordable housing solutions.

The lack of affordability of Ho Chi Minh City's real estate market goes hand in hand with the difficulties in meeting the legal conditions to access urban residence. In Vietnam, the *hộ khẩu*, or residence certificate, links each household to its location of residence. As shown by previous research, until recently, the requirements to change the residence registration were difficult to meet, especially when moving to centrally-administered cities [La Hai Anh et al. 2019: 214; The World Bank, VASS 2016: 5; Pulliat 2016: 12.11.2021]. The recent Law on Residence of 2020, in application since the 1st of July 2021, has simplified the residence registration process and abolished the special conditions to access permanent residence in centrally-administered cities, including Ho Chi Minh City [Law on Residence 2020, 20]. In addition, it is possible to obtain a permanent residence registration while renting a housing, if the tenant gets the agreement of the landlord. However, the Law stipulates that, in order to be a permanent residence, a housing must offer a minimum of 8 m<sup>2</sup> of floor per person [Law on Residence 2020, 20.3.b]. The current occupation of several rooms observed do not meet the conditions of permanent residence.

Moreover, changing the permanent residence means renouncing the land use rights to the rural land, hence, it is not necessarily advantageous for rural migrants [Pulliat 2013: 95]. Temporary residence registrations have been created to provide rural migrants with a registration status in the city [Liu, Dang Duc Anh 2019: 4–5]. The vast majority of the migrants interviewed in this study stay in the city with a temporary residence registration, *tạm trú*, and keep their *hộ khẩu* in the hometown. They describe the administrative process of the temporary registration as simple since it is handled by the landlord of the housing and only requires the migrant's identification card. Restricted access

<sup>2</sup> This study does not encompass high-skilled migration.

<sup>3</sup> PM Decision No. 66/2009/QĐ-TTg; Govt. Decree 188/2013/NĐ-CP, Circular 08/2014/TT-BXD from the Ministry of Construction, Housing Law of 2014 No. 24/2014/L-CTN; Govt. Decrees 99/2015/ND-CP; 100/2015/ND-CP; and 49/2021/ND-CP.

to the public education system happens to be one of the main drags that the absence of permanent urban registration puts on migrants' households, as the priority is given to parents with urban residence. When time comes to register their children for school, migrants can apply for a long-term temporary registration (KT3). In practice, on the study sites in Ho Chi Minh City, not having a permanent registration in the city does not limit the duration of presence in the city, nor the access to the housing market or to the private low-skilled job market. In that context, the *nhà trọ* provides an affordable option to the *tạm trú* holders, newcomers in the city as well as long-arrived migrants.

### When the temporary drags on

By the time of the interviews, informants had been staying in Ho Chi Minh City for between three months and thirty years, renting their place sometimes for more than ten years. A wide range of economic, social, legal and environmental factors converged in the decision to move. The same set of factors is at play in the decision to stay for decades in Ho Chi Minh City. Due to the agricultural transition and the “green revolution”, the farming sector requires less labor. The market prices have become more volatile and the competition with agribusinesses has been growing. At the same time, the promotion and generalization of urban lifestyles contribute to new and higher expectations. We observe a shift turning younger rural generations away from farming activity, like Quy<sup>4</sup>, a woman in her twenties, a factory worker coming from Quang Nam province in the Center. When asked why she decided to stay in the city she answered:

**“It is easier to find a job here. Back in my hometown, there are very few companies, mostly farming. Whereas here, there are many jobs for me to choose from.”**

In addition, environmental conditions like salinization, erosion, drought, heavy floods and typhoons put pressure on deltaic and coastal areas [Tran Thuc et al. 2016]. The limitation of farming incomes, the repetition of storms or droughts, the perspective of long-lasting consequences of salinization, appear less and less bearable when put in perspective with modern expectations, and the possibility of staying in the city. When asked about it, Hong, a 31-year-old factory worker who moved from a fishing village in Khanh Hoa province and married a man from Quang Nam province, expressed her fear of storms, preventing her from coming back.

**“It is easier to live in the city now because of the climate, there are no storms like in the countryside. [...] There are even more storms in my husband’s hometown than in mine. [...] I... don't dare to go back, I just think about it.”**

Thanh, a 37-year-old mototaxi driver from Ben Tre province who arrived ten years ago, explained that the lack of drinkable water due to salinization makes it difficult to raise cows. In addition, he was unfamiliar with the use of farming machines. Salinization, mechanization, and an insufficient land surface led him to confess:

**“Now, if I want to go back to live there, I don't know what to do anymore. It has been too long, I don't have the strength to do farming anymore, and I also don't know how to do it.”**

As time goes by in the city, trust-based interpersonal arrangements, horizontal relations between migrants and vertical relations between migrants and landlords, *chủ nhà*, might sustain a form of solidarity. Tenants might support each other through occasional loans or services, as they might do with colleagues. In one *nhà trọ*, one tenant was working as a nanny for the children of other tenants. The landlord, who sets the rules of life in the *nhà trọ*, and, in some cases, lives in a house on the same plot of land as the *nhà trọ*, might agree to loan money, to receive rent with a delay, to reduce

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<sup>4</sup> All the informants' names have been changed in order to maintain anonymity.

the rent or to provide basic food supplies in times of need, like during the Covid-19 pandemic. These informal transactions, included in a broader informal system of capital circulation, establish bonds between people [Pannier, Pulliat 2016: 116], financial bonds as well as personal ones. Meanwhile, for migrants working in the industrial sector, salaries increase yearly making it disadvantageous to quit the company. In these conditions, over the years, the *phòng trọ* can be personalized and adapted to a relatively higher standard of comfort when the financial conditions allow it. Hence, some *phòng trọ* have been decorated and gradually equipped by their tenants to include storage furniture, desk, TV, fridge, fan or AC (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** A rental room occupied for 12 years by a married couple and their 11-year-old daughter, in Go Vap district, Ho Chi Minh City. *Photo by the author, June 2020*

However, the situations are very diverse and cases of relative improvement of the living conditions in the city do not preclude other cases of long-term precarity and isolation (Fig. 5). One landlady warned us of less caring landlords. Plus, according to some interviewees, the support in the city remains limited in comparison with the hometown.

On that note, time and space constraints might not be inconsequential for social relations. The extensive working schedules of the migrants do not leave much time for socializing, and the design of the *nhà trọ* does not offer much space for gathering. Only in one *nhà trọ* observed, the landlady built an outside sitting area.





**Fig. 5.** A rental room occupied for 10 years by an elderly couple in Go Vap district, Ho Chi Minh City.  
*Photo by the author, August 2020*

Finally, for many migrants interviewed the mindset of temporariness remains when the mind stays in the hometown. Although most migrants encountered in Ho Chi Minh City only visit their hometown once a year, the connection remains. In addition to regular contacts with relatives, savings are often (not always) sent back to the hometown, whether for aging parents or children attending school. They are likely to be invested in land and housing in the hometown. Indeed, many migrants encountered still plan to return to their hometown when they get older and their physical condition does not allow them to keep up with the work in the city. That is the case of Mai, a lady of 58 years coming from Vinh Phuc province in the Red River Delta, who had been collecting recyclable trash for ten years in Ho Chi Minh City. At the time of the first interview in August 2020, she was considering going back soon, and she went back permanently in March the next year. This will to go back has been expressed by long-arrived migrants as well as newcomers. Tri, a mototaxi driver in his late thirties arrived from Vinh Long province in the Mekong Delta twenty years ago. He was sure he would go home **“because in his hometown... [he had] a house”**. Similarly, Minh, a 53-year-old mototaxi driver from Tien Giang province in the Mekong Delta, who arrived in Ho Chi Minh City only three months before the interview, was equally sure he would go back because **“everyone has to go home”**. The projection of many informants into a future return to the hometown invites us to step aside from viewing their present from the perspective of the “ideal state of full integration” (Çaglar 2016: 958).

But for some, their economic situation makes it inconceivable to go back, like for Xuan, a factory worker in her mid-twenties, pregnant and with one child, who arrived at only 13 years old from Thua Thien Hue province:

**“The thought of living here for a long time is... well, I'm used to it, but life... I also want to go back to my hometown to be comfortable, but I don't have money, my house. As a worker, I don't have enough money to buy a house or anything.”**



This impossibility is relative to the aspirations the migrants have for themselves or for their children. Duc, a mototaxi driver in his thirties, who left his spouse and his two children in Binh Thuan province on the South-East coast, was eager to be reunited with them. But he was staying alone in Ho Chi Minh City to sustain them and fund the education of his children, as he couldn't afford them staying and studying in the city. Talking about being in Ho Chi Minh City, he shared:

**“Now I just want to be close to my children, why would I be here? [...] Here it is only a temporary solution.”**

Finally, other informants value the life in the city better and would rather stay. This is the case of My, a 33-year-old woman working in a textile factory, the sister of Hong. To provide her children with a good environment, she chose to stay with her husband, her two young children and her mother in one of the highest standard *phòng trọ* observed on the study sites, next to her siblings. But her perspective has changed since she became a mother. With two children, the financial pressure, especially during the pandemic, led My to confess:

**“I prefer to live in Saigon, but now that I see that, I feel like I might have to go back to live in the hometown.”**

### Conclusion

In this paper the author analyzed rural-to-urban migration through the lens of temporariness and its translation into space. The mismatch between the initial design and the actual occupation of the *nhà trọ*, their adaptations over time, reveal the complexity of the temporalities of migration, as well as the intricacy of time and space dimensions in migration. The temporal interpretative grid sheds light on the blurriness between temporary and permanent, rarely emphasized in internal migration studies. The migration trajectories transform the rented rooms from simple shells into accommodations hosting fragments of life. Behind their doors, rural migrants live in a long-term temporary situation. They intend for the situation to be temporary, nevertheless it may last indeterminately. Today, the Covid-19 pandemic highlights how quickly the balance low-skilled rural migrants build in the city can shift. The factories in Go Vap and Binh Tan districts, as in other areas of Ho Chi Minh City, have been dismissing employees and reducing working schedules since the first quarter of 2020. In addition, the social distancing measures and lockdowns have put the livelihoods of the urban working class at risk. But even if the migration can be temporary, the concrete stays. Local media reported massive flows of rural migrants coming back to their hometowns, leaving the *nhà trọ* empty for now.

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## BUILDING SOUTH VIETNAMESE DELTA SETTLEMENTS IN THE WHIRLWIND OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Marion Reinoso

**Abstract.** Deltaic settlements worldwide are facing unprecedented challenges. This is especially the case in the Mekong Delta, where high population density, capital, and service provision increasingly intersect to expose vulnerable communities to the adverse effects of climate change. Due to a limited understanding of climate change, the presence of unique hydrological phenomena, and anthropogenic actions, the complex situation of the delta and its settlements has led to the implementation of inadequate architectural and urban solutions. This has caused abrupt socio-economic changes, shifting from an ecological integration mindset to a normative and disruptive approach resulting in the imposition of unsuitable models.

Community capacity, which includes low-cost, circular and reuse practices, can offer more ecological perspectives on sustainable building in the delta. Illustrating local in-depth environmental expertise, communities have developed socially and environmentally adapted construction cultures. This paper argues for an alternative paradigm in which cities and settlements promote and integrate local building knowledge to enable architectural and urban forms to play a leading role in the resilience of South-Vietnamese deltaic cities and to mitigate developmental impact on the environment.

Findings show a diversity of options and capacities at the local scale and flexibility in housing design. They also show that persistent gaps in policymaking and inconsistent perception of risk affects architectural and urban climate resilience. The discussion and conclusion advance the potential of local capacity in the building of South-Vietnamese deltaic cities, the need to integrate local knowledge and community capacity into policy, and the necessity to better assess local perception barriers to formulate localised, integrated and multisector policies to build resilient and sustainable South-Vietnamese settlements.

**Keywords:** urbanisation, climate change, housing adaptation, community capacity, risk perception.

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### Introduction

With 70% of its population living in coastal and low-lying areas, Vietnam is among the most vulnerable countries to climate change. Since the end of the war in 1975 and the positive socio-economic progress associated with opening up, the country has experienced high rates of urbanisation. Projections estimate a 57% increase in the urban population by 2050 [Garschagen 2010].

Globally, human settlements are responsible for high GHG emissions and land artificialisation. Building and housing policy is often not prioritised, despite their potential impact on climate adaptation. In the Vietnamese Mekong Delta (VMD) human settlements are facing large transformations in an already fragile and highly anthropized environment. Given the centralised power of the state and limited knowledge of the delta's ecological system [Miller 2007], the current approach to climate change by local actors makes little distinction between the effects of climate change, anthropogenic extractive causes and local hydrological phenomena. Most of the settlements



in the VMD are becoming increasingly impervious to water due to a “hard” infrastructure approach to development, which undermines the absorptive capacity of the delta and can exacerbate flooding. This stands in contrast to the 'free adaptation mechanism', which uses flexible, local 'soft mechanisms' to cope with annual disturbances, by introducing forced adaptation processes [Biggs 2011]. VMD settlements have therefore shifted from an ecologically integrative mindset to a normative and disruptive approach, imposing maladaptive patterns in human settlement construction and exacerbating ongoing challenges.

Many local challenges are the result of past developments, based on ideologies of centralised water control rather than on supporting local adaptation to changes and variability [Biggs et al. 2009: 203]. Given that Vietnam is a country where construction has not yet been professionalised, community capacity can play a central role in the sustainable construction of human settlements for climate mitigation, adaptation and resilience. Utilizing design and construction methods using locally available materials, these capacities can reinvigorate a historical and cultural understanding of human-environment coexistence at the local scale [Tran Thong Anh 2020: 175]. Resorting to designs and construction methods that use locally available resources to meet local needs, illustrating a historical and cultural understanding of human-environment coexistence at the local scale [Ibid.], communities have developed and continue to develop socially and environmentally appropriate growth [Vellinga 2005: 5]. This paper therefore explores an approach that considers community capacity, vernacular (not traditional) architecture and urbanism as a locus of indigenous knowledge and innovation for building more socially and environmentally sustainable settlements.

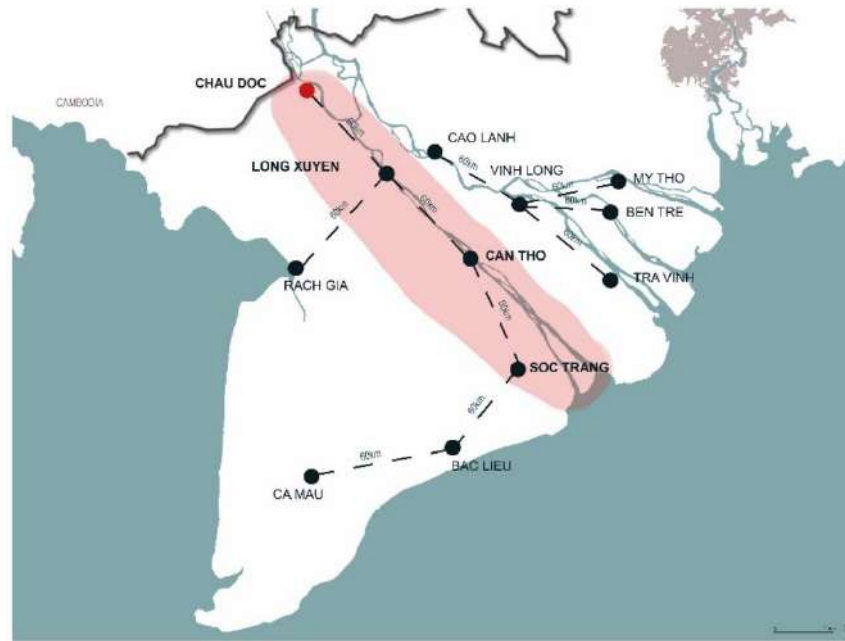
While acknowledging the complexity of local situations and the changes underway, this paper identifies community building processes and their drivers in selected VMD settlements, reflecting on their potential inclusion in urban and housing policies. Based on field observations, this research explores locally developed socio-technical processes, their conditions of existence, their limitations, and reasons for the disconnect between approaches and discourses. The methodology section presents the means of data collection in settlements and provides a literature review. Findings demonstrate the diversity of options and capacity, the flexibility in housing design, the persistent gaps in policy, and the influence of risk perception and 'modern' ideas on settlement development. The discussion explores the potential of local capacity, the challenge of integrating local knowledge into policy and the barriers of perception in greater detail. The paper concludes by highlighting the opportunities and constraints in developing alternative approaches to south Vietnamese cities.

### **Objective, material and method**

Using a qualitative methodology between social science and engineering, this paper focuses on selected human settlements along the Chau Doc – Soc Trang transect (Fig.1).

#### ***Physical and human context of the studied area***

Home to nearly 18 million people, the VMD is one of the largest delta systems in the world [Nguyen Hoang et al. 2016: 2303]. As the country's rice bowl, the delta's rapid development has led to intensifying human activities and rapid urbanisation, with negative impacts on the environment. However, due to the fragmentation of existing policies, the delta faces many governance obstacles to sustainable development. In light of its relatively recent development (compared to the Red River Delta in the North), intense climate vulnerability, and the presence of significant hydrologic and climatic events, the VMD is a fitting research laboratory in which to document community responses to shocks and their potential for resilience.



**Fig. 1.** Location of the Chau Doc-Soc Trang transect. *Author's drawing*

The selected Chau Doc – Soc Trang transect includes diverse geographical and cultural contexts. This paper focuses on urban fringes and new urban areas of Chau Doc, Long Xuyen, Can Tho and Soc Trang. During observation, these areas showed distinct local knowledge due to their fluctuating settings. Strongly influenced by fluvial processes in the upper delta (annual flooding) and marine processes (tides), as well as by tropical monsoon systems [Tran Thong Anh 2020: 165], this transect has been extensively anthropized by canal construction and agricultural expansion. This has changed the nature of the delta and altered the hydrology of the basin, reducing flooding periods and causing alarming ecological degradation, making the observation of transformations and local communities relevant [Christoplos et al. 2016].

#### *Qualitative data collection and analysis*

At first, data were collected through periods of anthropological observation of living and building processes. These observations enabled the development of preliminary hypotheses. During this phase, ways of living and using spaces throughout the day, buildings, mobility, and daily rhythms were explored and mapped. These sessions were supplemented by semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with local households to gather quantitative information about their methods of constructing habitats and urban typologies, skills, and daily activities. Interviewees were encouraged to explain their lifestyles, professional occupation, community structures, land status, and understanding of their living environment (Table 1).

Table 1. Research locations and type of data collection

Location	Date	Context	Type of data collection used
Chau Doc	April – May 2017	Riverbanks settlements (dry season)	Observations, group discussions with local communities (about 19 households interviewed), houses mapping.
Chau Doc	Sept. – October 2018	Riverbanks settlements, floating communities, and resettlement villages (wet season)	Photographic mapping and semi-structured interviews, resettlement communities.
Can Tho	October 2018	New urban districts (Workshops with local authorities and the Hanoi Architectural University)	Observations, group discussions with local communities and local authorities (10 households interviewed), urban mapping,
Long Xuyen	October 2018	City centre	Photographic mapping, informal discussions with local communities.
Sa Dec	April 2019	Riverbanks and Canals	Observations, photographic mapping, informal discussions with local communities.
Soc Trang	April 2019	Riverbanks areas and urban centre	Observations, photographic mapping.
Chau Doc	June 2019	Floating communities	Observations, architectural and urban mapping, semi-structured interviews (8 households interviewed).

Additionally, capturing the architectural and urban transformations in a constantly changing environment was fundamental to understanding local contexts. An experimental “transformation mapping” methodology was developed using photographic mirrors (photographing the same place at different times of the year) to capture urban cycles, rhythms, and transformations (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2. Examples of photographic mirrors in the surroundings of Chau Doc. Pictures were taken in the dry and rainy seasons to show changes in ways of living and using spaces. *Photos of the author*

Finally, a lexicon was developed to capture the interpretations and translations between Western and Eastern concepts. This was created to apprehend language the impact of language on biases and perceptions. The lexicon identifies the richness and potential of local terminology to reconceptualize the sustainability of existing coping mechanisms and to advocate for local practices use in sustainable development.

Table 2. Examples from the lexicon

Vietnamese	Meaning/idea	French	Meaning/idea
<b>Cảnh quan</b> (landscape)	<i>cảnh</i> : scenery, site, place <i>quan</i> : to observ, to be concerned ( <i>quan tâm</i> ), contemplate ( <i>quan sát</i> )	<i>Paysage</i>	Picture Latin : - <i>pagus</i> : territorial administration - <i>age</i> : collection
<b>Kháng cự</b> (resilience)	Idea of opposition/resistance <i>kháng</i> : to resist; to protest <i>cự</i> : to scold; to oppose; to resist	<i>Résilience</i>	Capacity to adapt and recover - flexibility
<b>Cầu thang</b> (staircase)	Idea of movement, crossing <i>cầu</i> : bridge <i>Thang</i> : ladder, range	<i>Escalier</i>	Rigid architectural object

### *Literature and policy overview*

#### *Community capacity to build within environmental conditions*

The capacity of communities to build amid environmental, climatic, and social conditions has been integral to human development, with vernacular architectures or urban typologies interdependently linked to community needs, cultural values and social relationships. Due to their dynamic nature, these local processes are not “anachronistic survivals” of the past but essential considerations for use in sustainable, culturally appropriate architecture [Oliver 2003].

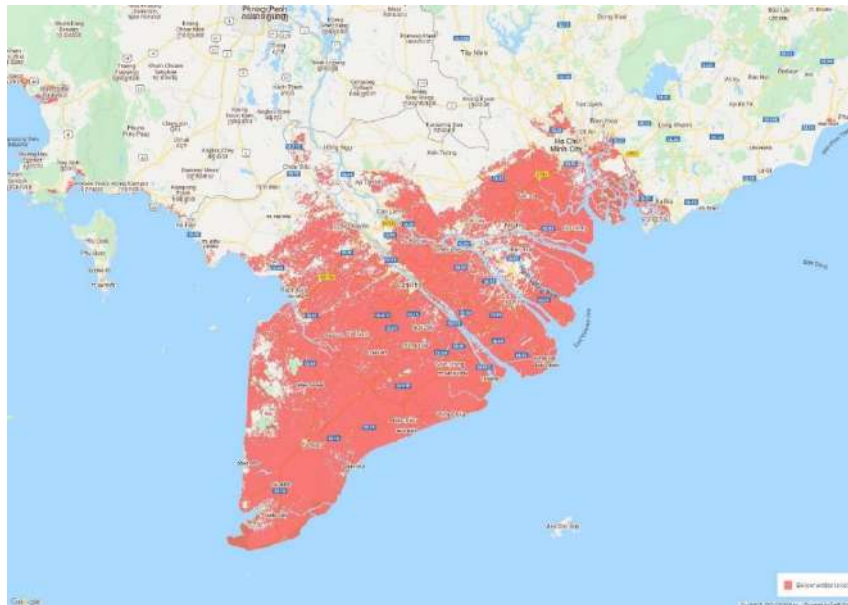
In the VMD, adaptation has always been part of local life, and vernacular processes are still multiform and valuable, providing critical architectural and environmental knowledge [Nguyen Anh Tuan et al. 2011: 2088]. This two-way relationship between people and their living environment is a refreshing approach to dealing with the causes and effects of climate change. Currently drawing mounting attention, community capacity and vernacular processes are increasingly included in emerging theory of climate change and development. For example, porous, sponge cities and nature-based approaches often use vernacular knowledge based on environmental observation and community capacity.

#### *The growing challenge of climate change and its local impacts*

Locally, the most severe impact of climate change is sea-level rise, with nearly 39% of the VMD estimated to be at risk of flooding from a one-metre sea-level rise (Fig. 3) [MONRE 2016].

Understanding of the growing challenge of climate change and its local impacts is still limited, making it hard to distinguish between effects caused by climate change, anthropic actions, and natural phenomena. Even in the absence of climate pressures, VMD communities have long faced natural disasters [World Bank 2010: 6]. 200 years of anthropic activities have resulted in the survival of only 0.068 million hectares of the delta as primary swamp forest ecosystems [Nguyen Hoang et al. 2016: 2304]. Government policies for resettlement, economic development, agricultural expansion, natural resource exploitation and infrastructure construction have played the most significant role in degrading the delta.





**Fig. 3.** Sea-level rise impact at the delta scale. The map shows in red areas at risks of water submersion from a one-metre sea-level rise. *Source:* climatecentral.org

Local authorities still consider climate change through the lens of disaster, producing policy that responds to disaster rather than adapting to climate change. Given that many risks related to climate change are amorphous and draw less attention than disasters, climate change adaptation is given low priority although adaptation requires long-term commitment [Christoplos et al. 2016: 460]. Adaptation has also been used as a political talking point to disempower states of their protection duty in the face of climate change, urging communities to adjust by themselves, forcing adaptation and affecting human rights [Djament-Tran et al. 2011: 22].

*Building and housing policies in response to climate change, and their suitability*

Governance at the delta scale is largely fragmented, involving many top-down processes [Smajgl 2018: 6]. Predominantly centralised, this governance reduces the leeway local authorities and residents have to act autonomously and enhance local resilience. Although the Mekong Delta Plan (2013) provides a comprehensive framework with an urban development component, the lack of vertical integration down to the local level affects sectoral action plans [Phan Thi An et al. 2019: 7], consequently reducing the development of effective initiatives. Furthermore, the existing top-down vision does not identify the diversity of contexts, leading to inadequate strategies that are detached from local realities, with little attention paid to social vulnerability or ‘soft’ adaptation measures [World Bank 2010: 14]. However, the responsibilities of local authorities are expanding following recent measures that decentralise many functions to the district level and that redefine local governance, with the involvement of civil society [Christoplos et al. 2016: 460].

This governance structure directly impacts the suitability of urban and housing policies in response to climate change. Several documents seek to address this issue [Smajgl 2018: 4]. However, economic growth and infrastructure development still dominate the agenda, side-lining building, social and environmental concerns [Fortier 2010]. Recently, international architectural and urban projects have not always been successful in cross-cultural transfer [Vellinga 2005: 5]. For example, VMD resettlement programmes, considered a key strategy for climate change adaptation, have tended to leave shelters little-used or unused, often leading to increased socio-economic vulnerabilities and



undermining people’s ability to adapt [Chun 2015; Miller, Dun 2019: 132]. While this failure is complex, the inability of policymakers and designers to consider holistic cultural needs, expectations, and environmental characteristics is a critical factor.

### Findings

#### *Diversity of options and capacity at local scale*

The first significant finding was the diversity of options, capacity and resources (human and material) mobilised at the local level to accommodate the deltaic system. Chau Doc's urban fringes and riverbanks were striking to observe and demonstrated the wide range of materials and construction techniques used by locals (wood, bamboo, concrete, stone with composite structures: stilts, floating systems, boats becoming houses, vegetal architecture). Focus group discussions revealed that building capacity often reflected the social values of local communities, such as solidarity and mutual assistance. During semi-structured interviews, several households outlined the commitment of family and community structures to building habitats and their ability to design without technical support. This demonstrated persistent local knowledge and agency.

The photographic mapping revealed the creative capacity of communities to live in a changing environment. Buildings were built using low-cost mechanisms to provide climate-friendly settlements, with unique processes such as ventilated floors and adequate spacing between houses to maximise natural cooling, as illustrated below (Fig. 4). Around houses, the photographic mapping also highlighted the use of so-called nature-based solutions. These are now widely recognised internationally as means of developing sustainable systems, based on local ecosystems and the services they provide (for example, bamboo forests for protection from waves, fruit trees to create natural shade and prevent soil erosion).



**Fig. 4.** Examples of building processes used in the VMD. *Photos and pictures by the author*

During semi-structured interviews, most interviewees stated that they felt part of a whole system, including their habitat and living environment, and considering the delta an entire territory. As delta areas are interconnected and dependant on physical and geographical plans, this observation was fundamental in revealing the nature of people's 'sense of place', which is reflected in modest and efficient buildings, driven by flexible concepts (stilts, floating surfaces, mobile floors). One respondent indicated that his house was entirely designed to be taken apart and rebuilt elsewhere.

This capacity for adaptation and flexibility was, however, subject to cultural factors. Several migrant communities experiencing high rates of landlessness and dependency on wage labour did not show the same degree of in-situ adaptability, preferring seasonal migration patterns to adapt. Observations in Cham communities have shown their extensive abilities to adapt and live in highly flooded areas, notably due to their marginalisation in at risk areas. Similarly, Khmer groups residing in the delta did not show the same degree of flexibility. Often located in “dry areas”, their exposure to climatic hazards was limited, decreasing the necessity for them to develop adaptable housing and reducing their capacity to adapt their buildings.

### *Degrees of flexibility in housing design*

Interview findings highlighted the lack of urban and architectural regulations, demonstrating the leeway and variability in resultant construction. This vagueness of regulation is considered advantageous to expand local community capacity as people can build as they wish (no respondent reported the obligation to have a “building permit”). For urban fringe houses along canals and rivers, land limits and tenure were challenging to understand, especially among interviewees who had stilt houses. Signposts informing locals of construction limits (for flood risk) appeared along the banks, without being necessarily followed.

Despite presenting opportunities, this lack of guidance and clarity could pose adaptation risks in new urbanised areas if maladaptive approaches are adopted. The use of concrete on entire parcels of land was observed in Can Tho, contributing to soil artificialisation and increasing urban floods risk as illustrated in the following pictures (Fig.5). This example shows the lack of urban regulations to advance water absorption, potentially limiting the adaptive capacity of residents.



**Fig. 5.** Newly urbanized areas in Can Tho. Most unused parcels are covered with concrete, and houses have not been elevated. *Photos by the author*

### *Persistent gaps in policymaking*

The above findings identified persistent gaps in policymaking, reducing the architectural and climate resilience of local settlements. As stated in the literature review, a fundamental shift has been made towards developing a more local approach, resulting in a combination of top-down and bottom-up strategies at the local scale. However, according to discussions with local authorities and the policy review, current strategies continue to focus on upgrading infrastructure and developing projects designed as one-off adaptation responses along “rigid” lines. In resettlement villages, promoted as an optimum solution, inhabitants reported that many households received low-interest loans to build new homes while some were provided with houses. These were usually unelevated and “rigid”, with poor natural ventilation. Most interviewees understood the purpose of the resettlement programme, although many did not consider their previous living areas dangerous. These operations in the observed locations showed that vulnerabilities increased as young residents left for more prominent urban centres, leaving behind children and the elderly with limited access to basic services and economic opportunities. Costs of living also rose due to loan and electricity payments.

Observations showed that land management excludes the most vulnerable making resiliency more difficult. Most respondents in migrant and floating communities near Chau Doc and Long Xuyen urban centres noted difficulties in accessing basic services and land to settle on due to issues obtaining legal documents.

### *Specific risk perception and misunderstanding of local strategies*

Perception was also a central topic of discussion, including the challenge of perceiving risk and understanding the effects of climate change. Many inhabitants did not see floods as a risk, whereas the current political discourse encourages any activity and projects to protect against them. Another discrepancy was illustrated in group discussions with Can Tho officials, where local authorities could not always differentiate between climate change and anthropic pressures, and little interest was shown in understanding local risk perceptions or community responses. Furthermore, as risk management has always been part of life in the VMD, the over-attribution of climate change as a cause of risks has led to a misunderstanding and misdirection of local communities, who also fail to distinguish between the effects of “normal” phenomena, anthropogenic actions, and climate change.

Language bias was also identified. As shown by the development of the experimental lexicon, several concepts were not always well translated or understood, reinforcing the inadequacy and misunderstanding of climate strategies.

Finally, ongoing social changes have led to a transformative vision of modernity, highly illustrated in new building developments throughout the VMD with the overuse of inappropriate, imported models using western codes and spatial representation. As a result, many vernacular processes have been disregarded, although new models do not facilitate climate change adaptation.

## **Discussions**

### *The potential of local capacity in climate resilience*

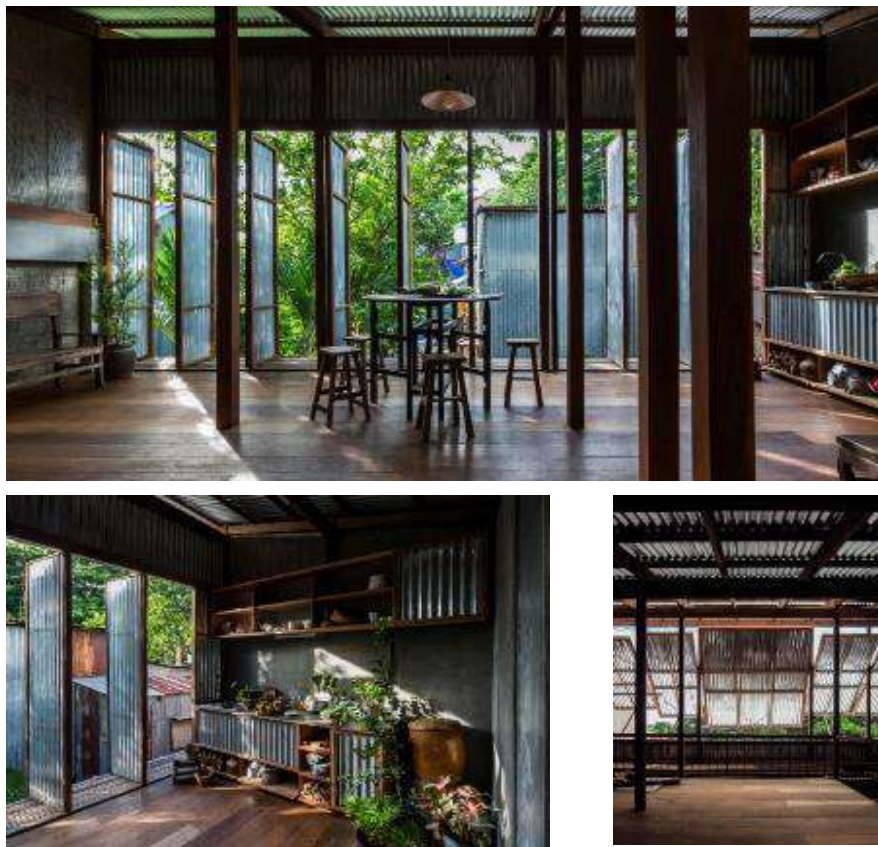
Findings showed that local capacity could undoubtedly offer a developmental alternative that is more anchored in local realities than modern developmental approaches. In the VMD, local capacity has demonstrated that environmental knowledge is vital for disaster risk reduction and



climate change adaptation. By developing flexible in situ architecture and water urbanism with territorial interconnections, communities have developed socially adapted human settlement models that can potentially be reused in adaptation initiatives.

However, several issues challenge such practices. The first limitation is the result of social change linked to the idea of modernity, and access to building resources, in highly anthropized territories dedicated to agriculture. Finding local and sustainable materials is now a crucial issue at the scale of the delta. Besides, urban residents may have more constraints on individual adaptation than rural residents due to land pressures and reduced social capital, curbing opportunities to migrate to “safer areas”. Furthermore, newcomers, often migrants from other provinces, have low participation in community activities because many lack legal residence permits which can influence their ability to adapt to their living environment. Although community engagement remains strong throughout the Delta, this growing pattern may limit capacity.

To find the right balance between local knowledge and the desire for modernity, many local architects reuse traditional models by learning from local builders. One of many examples in the VMD can be found in Chau Doc. The housing project of Nishizawa Architects uses codes and materials of local stilt houses (Fig.6). As illustrated below, the architectural form and processes used, especially for ventilation and cooling, are characteristic of local housing and enhance the building’s comfort while having a modern appearance.



**Fig. 6.** Architectural details of the “revisited” stilt house of Nishizawa in Chau Doc. The house looks like all the others (size, shape, materials) from the street while being environmentally friendly and adapted to modern life. *Resource:* <https://www.nishizawaarchitects.com>

Finally, new concepts based on local capacity and vernacular housing are increasingly emerging in delta settlements. The concept of porous cities or nature-based solutions often refers to vernacular ecological knowledge, which is based on observations of the environment and community capacity and can strengthen the human-environment relationship.

*The challenge of integrating local knowledge and community capacity into policy*

Integrating local capacity and knowledge into policy is a critical challenge for the selected area. This is especially the case, as top-down governance and sectoral fragmentation result in slow policymaking and because there is no comprehensive set of guidelines for sustainability in Vietnam, due to the diversity of contexts [Nguyen Hong Trang et al. 2017: 8]. As many Vietnamese regions are likely to experience unique climate impacts, a single national adaptation policy will not advance resilience. This highlights the need for autonomous initiatives, community and individual actions, and gender and ethnic sensitivity.

As explained above, the poor distinction between the effects of climate change and other influences contributes to a weak understanding of climate change impacts. For example, some of the urban strategies reviewed did not identify land subsidence (due to decades of water pumping) as an anthropogenic influence. Climate change is also used as a scapegoat for environmental mismanagement, posing direct threats to the full and effective enjoyment of many human rights. The climate crisis considerably impacts human settlements and cities, consequently calling for coherence between climate and housing policies in order to guarantee the right to housing. However, given the uncertainty and invisibility of ongoing changes, climate resilience is often negotiated and not prioritised. In the VMD, resettlement has become a preferred tool with adverse effects on local capacity.

*Perception barriers*

Findings highlighted several barriers to community capacity due to risk perception and language bias. While risks have always been part of life in the VMD, the ubiquity of climate change in the media and local discourse has led to misunderstandings within local communities. Semi-structured interviews illustrated several issues in concept translation, influencing strategies at all scales. When translating global concepts into Vietnamese, semantic nuances can be lost, as was the case with “resilience”. Recognised as the “capacity of social, economic and environmental systems to cope with a hazardous event”, resilience is often translated as “kháng cự” in Vietnamese, conveying the idea of resistance and rigidity. Failing to consider semantic elements in communicating sustainability concepts can hinder effective discussion among local and international actors.

Moreover, local perceptions and capacities are highly influenced by a specific idea of modernity resulting in the adoption of unsuitable models, often imported and climatically inappropriate. This is particularly the case in VMD settlements and significantly impacts the construction market and living environments. The construction of “rigid houses” with non-flexible structures is now a common practice. Some interviewees in Long Xuyen explained that “fencing, a concrete house, air conditioning and tiled floor were important as it looks nicer when we invite guests at home”. However, the mass use of materials such as concrete and the development of imported models directly affects mobility, lifestyles, and the definition of private and public space. Abrupt changes in building practices can lead to abrupt social changes, local knowledge loss, and increased inequality.



## Conclusion

This paper identified the building processes of communities in the VMD and their drivers in selected delta settlements to reflect on their potential use in response to climate change.

The research investigated local capacity and their socio-technical dynamics, limits and the reasons for their limited integration into local strategies. While loose housing policy has allowed for a diversity of approaches, findings also showed persistent gaps in policymaking and specific risk perceptions also adversely influenced the implementation of local strategies. The discussion highlighted the potential of local capacity in climate resilience. It also demonstrated the challenge of integrating local knowledge into policy, and the barriers of perception affecting how communities build settlements in the VMD. The paper concludes by emphasising the need to advance alternative housing and urban adaptation mechanisms considering local knowledge and advocating for the urgent need to develop more localised, integrative and multisector policies to better build south Vietnamese settlements.

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## HISTORY AND CULTURE

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### CREATING A “MICRO-COLONY” WITHIN A PROTECTORATE: THE EXAMPLE OF THE FRENCH CONCESSION OF TOURANE (ĐÀ NẴNG), 1884–1889

Sunny Le Galloudec\*

**Abstract.** Although history ultimately favored the portuary development of *Sài Gòn* and *Hải Phòng*, it was Tourane (*Đà Nẵng*) that was the initial target of French colonial ambitions in the Indochinese peninsula. For over a century (1740–1858), its bay and territory had been the scene and the epicenter of Franco-British overseas imperial rivalries, a fact which actively fostered an entire set of colonial images about the site, which was quite often referred to as potential base to serve the interests of commerce and the Navy. Despite these ambitions nurtured over a long period, it was only after the conquest of Tonkin, thirty years after the Cochinchina expedition, that its territory was finally established as a concession: on 3 October 1888, the French were finally seizing juridical control of Tourane.

As a conceded territory, Tourane was essential to French colonial and imperial designs. The focal point of political and economic ambitions, it was both a gateway and a means to prepare and support the French colonial project in Indochina. A hybrid and previously unknown template, the conceded territory model designed for, and from, Tourane indeed allowed the French to implement new strategies to tighten colonial rule in Indochina.

Offering an unprecedented analysis on the creation of the French concession of Tourane at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this research examines the political context during which it was conceived, the work and conclusions given by the commission in charge of studying its borders and jurisdiction, and the steps taken by the colonial administration in order to seize definitive control of a strategic territory inside what was then left of the *Đại Nam* Kingdom. All in all, comparing Tourane with others treaty ports, it shows how and why its territory stood out as a “micro-colony” in a protectorate territory (Annam-Tonkin).

**Keywords:** Southeast Asia, French Indochina, Vietnam, Annam-Tonkin, Tourane, Đà Nẵng, Indochinese ports, open ports, treaty ports, concession, colonization.

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\* Translated from the French with the help of John Barzman.

## Introduction

While the history of East Asian treaty ports continues to attract sustained scientific attention [Bickers, Jackson 2018],<sup>1</sup> no specialized study has yet come forth on the port city-concessions of Vietnam under colonial rule. Similarly, despite its importance in colonial and contemporary Vietnam, the port city of *Đà Nẵng* (formerly Tourane) remains one of the main blind spots in the historiography on French Indochina.<sup>2</sup> It has been overlooked in the history of concessions and port cities in the Far East, as well as in the history of French colonial harbours<sup>3</sup>.

This paper aims to begin filling what amounts to a genuine historiographic black hole, as it contributes to advance the knowledge of the juridical, economic, maritime and harbour situation of Indochina at the time of the unequal treaties. Using archives gathered in France and Vietnam and applying a doubly comparative approach — on the one hand with the other territorial concessions wrested from the Vietnamese Imperial Court between 1874–1888; on the other, with the Chinese treaty ports —, it will focus on the cession of Tourane to the French in the late 1880s.

Despite their particularities, the mechanisms behind it clearly evokes the strategy deployed first in India by the Great Chartered Companies, then in the Straits Settlements, finally in China through the two Opium Wars.<sup>4</sup> As the outcome of a policy favoring the establishment of informal territorial control, the cession of Tourane should be understood within a larger movement: that of the expansion of the great Western powers and race to open new markets in the Far East.

Showing that the French concession of Tourane was conceived as a genuine “micro-colony” in the protectorate of Annam-Tonkin, this study attempts to answer the following question: why and how did Tourane, a port opened to the South China Sea (*Biển Đông*), permitted the introduction of a new form of colonial rule inside the Indochinese Union?

### Tourane and the conquest of Indochina: a strategic concession?

On 6 June 1884, the signing of the Patenôtre Treaty, elaborated from the Harmand Treaty (25 Aug. 1883), consecrated the recognition of the French Protectorate over Annam-Tonkin, a new and key stage in the constitution of French Indochina. The ports of Tourane, *Quy Nhơn* and *Xuân Đài* were open to international trade, and conferences were to be held, following ratification of the treaty, to settle “the boundaries of the open ports and French concessions in each of these ports” (art. 18).

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<sup>1</sup> See also “Treaty Port China in World History 1842–1930”. Postgraduate Online Workshop organized by the University of Portsmouth’s ‘Port Towns and Urban Cultures’ group (July 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Except for two books published by Vietnamese historians (see bibliography). However, these publications are incomplete in many ways, especially about the colonial era. Their authors adopt an event-based and monographic approach that substantially limit their point of view and conclusions.

<sup>3</sup> About the importance of Tourane during the precolonial period, see: Le Galloudec S. (2019). *La mer de Chine méridionale (mer de l’Est), terrain des rivalités impériales ultramarines franco-britanniques: le cas de Tourane (1740–1858)*. *Journées du GIS HSM, MRSH de Caen*, 27 Nov. (to be published in 2022 in *Revue d’Histoire maritime*). We should also note that the the Nguyễn emperors (Gia Long and Minh Mạng in particular) were fully aware of European intentions in the region and well understood the strategic importance of Tourane, which they fortified and used to limit and better control the arrival of Westerners on their territory [Đại Nam thực lục (ĐNTL): years 1826, 1829, 1847, 1856–58].

<sup>4</sup> On the first signs of the concession system and its shift from the East Indies to the Far East, see: Klein J.-F. (2009). *Une thalassocratie asiatique britannique?* In: D. Barjot, C.-F. Mathis (eds.). *Le monde britannique: 1815–1931*. Paris: A. Colin, 130–141.

On 20 Dec.1884, Gabriel Lemaire, Resident-General in Annam-Tonkin (RGAT), instituted a special Commission to that effect. In his instructions to Édouard Navelle, the Commission's president, he asked its members to determine the conditions under which the future French establishments could develop [ANOM, FM, SG Indo, AF, 107, F 20. Lemaire to Navelle, 14 Feb. 1885]. The purpose was to gather information about customs surveillance, security and health standards of each site, as well as on the facilities available for navigation and trade. They were also advised to consider the opinion and feelings of the local scholar officials and populations as to the future French presence. One of the main goals was to prepare the ground for the establishment of a limited colonial juridical framework within the protectorate. No longer relying on the narratives of missionaries, seamen, naval officers or traders, as had been the practice in the past [Le Galloudec 2019], the point now was to draw up a complete and reliable report on the local situation, to be forwarded to the Minister of the Navy and Colonies (MNC). The report was handed over on 22 Mar. 1885, after three months of inquiry [Ibid., Rapport de la commission, 22 Mar. 1885; ANOM, GGI, série F, file 5989]: things had to move at a brisk pace.

Indeed, the establishment of the protectorate was conducted in the same spirit that prevailed in Cochinchina when it was conquered in the 1860s: to gain a firm hold on the country, one had to erode little by little the Vietnamese imperial authority. For most of the men entrusted with its implementation, its conception was an “unfinished solution”, to be applied temporarily until the introduction of a direct administration; the colony of Cochinchina had to serve as a “model” for the whole of *Đài Nam* [Fourniau 2002: 361–362].

But very soon a conflict erupted between the military and civilian authorities over the management and future of the protectorate. The former, knowing the weaknesses of the Court – affected by a dynastic crisis since the death of Tự Đức –, hoped “to get rid of the ruling dynasty or, at least, to weaken it to such an extent that the Confucian framework of the state would be broken” [Ibid.]. All things considered, it meant a complete overhaul of colonial domination in Annam-Tonkin. By contrast, on the civilian side, no one was seeking to go beyond what had been established.

This antagonism, at first symbolized by the Bouet vs. Harmand opposition, continued between General Brière de Lisle – in charge of the Franco-Chinese war and the “pacification of Tonkin” – and Lemaire, who had set up the Navelle Commission. And as it were, the latter was composed mainly of military officers (from both the Navy and Army)<sup>5</sup>: speaking rights therefore tended to favor the military and commercial interests, precisely at the time that the military administration and French business circles concentrated all their efforts on the definitive acquisition of Tonkin.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the Commission report tended to reflect the aspirations to place what was left of the *Đài Nam* Kingdom under definitive trusteeship. Moreover, when Lemaire addressed its report to the MNC, he did not fail to express his reservations about the annexationist intentions it contained, commenting that the aim of the French government was “to concentrate the flow of exchanges” in the open ports of Annam, and “not at all to annex to our possessions, under some form of ambiguous domination, any part of the Annamite territory” [ANOM, FM, SG (Indo), AF, 107, F 20. Lemaire to MNC, 10 Apr. 1885].

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<sup>5</sup> Mentioned are: Navelle, president and reporter; Hennique, captain of the *Lionne*; Bruneau, artillery captain; Nollet, medical officer of the *Lionne*, and Larosière, chief of the Customs Office.

<sup>6</sup> The point was to overcome the failure of the Saigonese project which aimed to give France a decisive support base on the shores of the “Asian Mediterranean” [Gipouloux 2011]. The myth of Yunnan, revived by Francis Garnier and Jean Dupuis, had shifted attention and ambitions towards Tonkin, the Red River and *Hải Phòng*.



Nevertheless, everything converged in that direction. On 14 Apr. 1885, shortly after the fall of Jules Ferry, the Brisson government appointed the count of Courcy new commander-in-chief and RGAT. Lemaire was dismissed while all power was placed in the hands of a military officer. Less than three months later, the new appointee issued an order to his troops to attack the *Huế* citadel (5 July 1885). This sudden use of force against the Court, the outcome of which ended any kind of autonomy of the Nguyễn dynasty authority, testifies to the weight acquired by the “annexationists” from the “Hanoi clan” [Fourniau 2002: 363]. Moreover, beyond the ambitions of the military, the event followed the treaty of Tianjin (9 June 1885) which sealed Franco-Chinese peace and the international recognition of French domination on the north of *Đài Nam*.<sup>7</sup>

Given the context, the recommendations of the Navelle Commission do not seem to have been adventuresome. The report was submitted only four months before the seizure of *Huế*. Had the assault been prepared to approve the measures recommended by the Commission? Was the French concession of Tourane to serve as a strategic base in case the country became destabilized? Both hypotheses are tempting. All in all, it looks like the demarcation of the Tourane concession was part of the more general desire to take definitive possession of *Đài Nam*.<sup>8</sup> However, the urge to impose direct administration was not realized in either Annam or Tonkin. The status of protectorate remained the actual juridical form of domination, which contributed to make more complex the “Indochinese system” [Gojosso 2016].

The whole interest of the territorial concessions wrested in 1884 seems to lay in providing a location where French territorial, administrative and political structures could be secured firmly. As Lemaire himself said, the Patenôtre Treaty did not create a clear distinction between the boundaries of the area allocated to open ports and those where concessions would be established. The possibility of drawing a real political and economic advantage from this situation was discussed. As the structures to be built there were to be lasting and progressive, security would also be enforced against “the internal as well as the external enemy” [ANOM, FM, SG (Indo), AF, 107, F 20. Lemaire to MNC, 10 Apr. 1885].

The Tourane concession, as it was imagined by the Commission, thus encompassed a twofold purpose: providing a base for retreat in case of attacks, since it was planned to maintain military positions there; and a commercial port open to East Asia, the result of ambitions nurtured in the past [Le Galloudec 2019] but reactivated by French ambitions against Siam in the mountainous hinterland of the Indochinese midriff. The point was no longer to be satisfied with the mere opening of its port to commerce, as announced, among others, in the treaty of 1862, but also to root French authority and administration in a lasting fashion and to attract metropolitan capital there. The territorial clauses of the previous treaties too, confirm that the French had very precise objectives as to the territory; objectives that pertained to colonial, or even imperial, geostrategic motivations.

As it were, the signing of the Harmand Treaty occurred at the moment when Franco-Chinese antagonisms reached their apex, when the Nguyễn dynasty was in the midst of a succession crisis, and when French positions in Tonkin seemed precarious. By obtaining the cession of a part of the Tourane territory within the overall protectorate they were trying to impose on *Huế*, the French hoped to gain an alternative solution to which they could retreat in case Tonkin was lost. From this new base located near the imperial capital, they would be able both to maintain on-going pressure on *Huế* and to reconstitute their armed forces to launch a counter-offensive. Moreover, from the legal

<sup>7</sup> The conquest was definitively recognized on 24 Dec. 1885.

<sup>8</sup> Or at least impose a stricter form of trusteeship.

standpoint, particularly in the eyes of traders and industrialists, this new mode of management would provide better returns.

Nevertheless, nothing was ratified in 1883: Paris wished to avoid a direct war with China, which the establishment of such a political regime would not have failed to provoke.<sup>9</sup> But the conflict proved unavoidable. Fortunately for French interests, it led to a peace based on the Li-Fournier Convention, then on the Patenôtre Treaty. Circumstances came to favor France quite markedly, and it chose to keep the same document which it had imposed in 1883. The territorial clauses were similar, but the context very different: the protectorate over Annam-Tonkin had been established officially, and the French now enjoyed considerable means to develop their trade with China.

While the territorial concessions inside the open ports of Annam were seen, somewhat fancifully, as the key to a broad commercial expansion strategy, by contrast, on the ground, the situation was far from stabilized: the military intervention in Hue had negative consequences. Beginning in July 1885, Annam became the scene of a frontal clash that pitted the vast *Cần Vương* national uprising against the colonial regime intent on setting up its structures. As the war extended to the Tonkin delta, the protectorate found itself in a dead end, and discontent over Indochina reached a new high point [Fourniau 2002: 404–424]. In 1886 [Ngô Văn Minh 2007: 95–102] and 1887 [EPCC French Lines & Cies, Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes, Agency of Tourane, activity reports, 1887 (1997 002 4485)], insurrections even spread right to the gates of Tourane. The project of transforming its territory into a French concession, in line with the annexationist goals of the military, almost instantly ran up against the political instability pervading Annam and postponed the aspirations expressed by the Commission. Ultimately, the effective consolidation of the Touranese colonial project required a certain degree of political stability.

For many, the Indochinese colonial domain appeared as a true administrative absurdity. The heterogeneity of the statuses<sup>10</sup> could no longer be sustained, and important changes were necessary to rationalize the colonial undertaking. In Oct. 1887, with the birth of the Indochinese Union, a remedy was finally discovered. A government of Indochina would henceforth insure political unity by acting on all Indochinese territories under French rule, each nevertheless preserving its own form of autonomy [Gojosso 2016].

In a way, the Union was mainly the result of the victory of the annexationist perspectives: while the regime of the protectorate was preserved within its framework, it was now a mere “administrative formula”. Thus, this new political unity inaugurated the final consolidation of the Touranese colonial project launched in 1885, which aimed precisely to establish a new concessionary system that favored French domination. Clearly the new situation could only be favorable to a renewed interest in the main port of Annam.

In June 1888, in his first report as Governor General (GG), Richaud appeared particularly dissatisfied with the situation created by the Patenôtre Treaty in Annam: he felt that the French had not secured sufficient rights there, unlike in Tonkin, and that major concessions could therefore be extracted from *Huế* [ANOM, FM, SG (Indo), FM, SG (Indo), AF, A 30. Report of Richaud, 10 June 1888]. These would enable France to establish the supremacy it sought so keenly, by dominating the political capital of *Đại Nam* from up close. The policy pursued by Richaud therefore clearly stood in

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<sup>9</sup> The protectorate was intended to directly challenge the survival of the system of subjection of the *Đại Nam* Kingdom to Peking.

<sup>10</sup> Indochina was then made of the colony of Cochinchina, of the protectorates of Cambodia and Annam-Tonkin, and there already existed port-concessions (in the protectorates) that were placed under colonial law.

line with that of the Navelle Commission, as well as of Courcy and the “Hanoi clan”. Richaud viewed Tourane as a base point of major importance, both for regional economic development and for strategic objectives [Ibid. Report of 18 Oct. 1888].

In late Sept. 1888, he made his way to *Huế* [Voyage à Hué 1888: 1]. His goal was to take advantage of the relative stability of the region and of the devotion of *Đông Khánh* to the French to negotiate a new convention. In exchange for satisfying the latter’s requests, Richaud was able to obtain two royal ordinances. The first, dated 1 Oct. 1888, was designed to put into practice art. 18 of the 1884 treaty, which represented a major advance for France: “*Hà Nội*, *Hải Phòng* and *Tourane* [were] elevated to the status of French concessions and ceded in full ownership to the French government” [Ibid., 10–11]. The ordinance was implemented two days later: on 3 Oct. 1888, the French concession of *Tourane* was officially born. Richaud’s move was putting an end to nearly a century and a half of ambitions and unsuccessful attempts to take over this territory [Le Galloudec 2019]. At the same time, it opened a new cycle of hopes of all kinds, turning *Tourane* into a new colonial utopia [Le Galloudec 2018].

Conceded at a key moment of the acquisition and “pacification” of Tonkin, *Tourane* must have held a definite strategic dimension in the eyes of French administrators and business interests rooted/involved in Indochina, or dreaming of opening the large hinterland explored by the *Pavie* mission. This would suffice to explain the desire to erect a hybrid concessionary system from it, at once taking the procedures in effect in most Chinese treaty ports as its model [Bickers, Jackson 2018] and in opposition to the measures previously adopted in the concessions obtained in 1874.

### **The Touranese concession, a new colonial system?**

In its report, the Commission focused on *Tourane* and *Xuân Đài*, rather than *Qui Nhơn*, *Hải Phòng* and *Hà Nội*, French concessions since 1874. It insisted markedly on this point, as it was out of question to repeat the “errors” of the previous decade. It was necessary to break out of the narrow territories that had become intolerable and unsuitable for French designs. The future concessions were to allow an effective territorial and political takeover inside the protectorate [ANOM, FM, SG (Indo), AF, 107, F 20. Rapport de la commission], a requirement the context of 1884–1885 was now putting within reach.

In 1874, as the circumstances did not allow, their area amounted to only five *mẫu* ( $\approx 2.5$  ha), which was far from enough to establish the territorial control that had been expected. Dissatisfied with a situation that hampered the management and extension of political and commercial undertakings, the consuls had renegotiated their boundaries upwards, particularly in *Hà Nội* and *Hải Phòng*. Nevertheless, if the French had succeeded in establishing themselves and slightly improving the perimeter of their concessions, their situation remained precarious [Raffi 1994; Papin 2001].

A decade later, Paris had adopted a subtly orchestrated tactic: the juridical foundations of the new concessions voluntarily remained somewhat vague, stating only that “subsequent conferences” would settle “the limits of the open ports and French concessions in each of these ports”; a clause which led to create the *Navelle Commission*.

Now that *Tourane* and *Xuân Đài* offered new opportunities for taking root inside the protectorate, a reinterpretation of the status usually attributed to a conceded territory emerged. The concession was no longer to be limited to a mere parcel of land. It would have to be vast enough for the authority to which it was granted to make it into an autonomous site, ruled by a set of laws different

from those of the “protected” kingdom from which it was subtracted [ANOM, SG (Indo), AF, 107, F 20. Rapport de la commission].

The Commission thereby attempted to demonstrate the benefits that the protectorate could bring to the administration and economic development of the country, and even to the well-being of its population. Briefly stated, the appropriation of territory was justified with scarcely veiled colonist arguments. France’s aid and protection could not be guaranteed, reach its goal and provide good results if *Huế* refused to grant it these concessions in good conditions; that is, by implementing a local transfer of power. A new concession system was to be adopted, enhancing the definitive placement of *Đai Nam* under French tutelage, which amounted to implement the annexationist goals of the “Hanoi clan”.

Following that purpose, the boundaries of the Tourane concession were to be “Frenchified” on “all the territory encompassing the boundaries of the open port” [Ibid.]. That explains its considerable surface (fig. 1, 2, 3). As to the rights of the occupiers, the Commission wished that French authority should take over on those the Emperor had initially granted. Tourane would become a vast autonomous zone, placed in the hands of the colonial authorities. In other words, the idea was to obtain a kind of colonial enclave inside the protectorate, a miniature Cochinchina. And since they were to be established inside open ports, one had to foresee their commercial and economic development, again in contrast with the form and aims of the concessions obtained in 1874. In that way, the Commission hoped that Tourane and *Xuân Đai* were to become the main commercial centers of Annam, placed under the protection of the French [Ibid. Lemaire to MMC].

Tourane therefore was intended to serve the interests of French business circles whose establishment was to be not only facilitated but optimized. As we know, behind political decisions stood genuine pressure groups that enacted and carried the different stages of the conquest. Clearly, the members of the Commission were not absent from the process.

Ultimately, they proposed to delineate an area of about 8 km<sup>2</sup> (800 ha) in *Xuân Đai*, and an “even much greater area” [Ibid.] in Tourane (fig. 1), including:

The mouth of the *sông Hàn* and its banks, “the only path for the commercial development of the port” [Ibid. Rapport de la commission].

The *Tiên Sa* peninsula, for security and strategic reasons rather than for a potential extension of the port and its infrastructures, as would be the case some years later [Le Galloudec 2018].

A broad surface that was at once capacious and usable, to the south and west, so that the French administration and authorities could set up without feeling constricted, to be followed by future settlers involved in small trade, commerce and plantations; and so that the center could grow without obstacles and the neighboring cultivated areas could be controlled by the French authorities.

The Marble Mountains, located southeast of Tourane.

A few hundred dwellings, for political reasons: the goal being to make possible “propaganda for our ideas and our influence” [Ibid. Lemaire to MNC]. This was linked to the Commission putting forward the idea that the Vietnamese already established on the conceded territories should be offered the possibility of becoming French through naturalization [Ibid. Rapport de la commission]. This may express a will to go beyond Frenchification of the land (which went against the Patenôtre Treaty but corresponded to the direction indicated by the “civilizing mission” propelled by the imperial Republic).



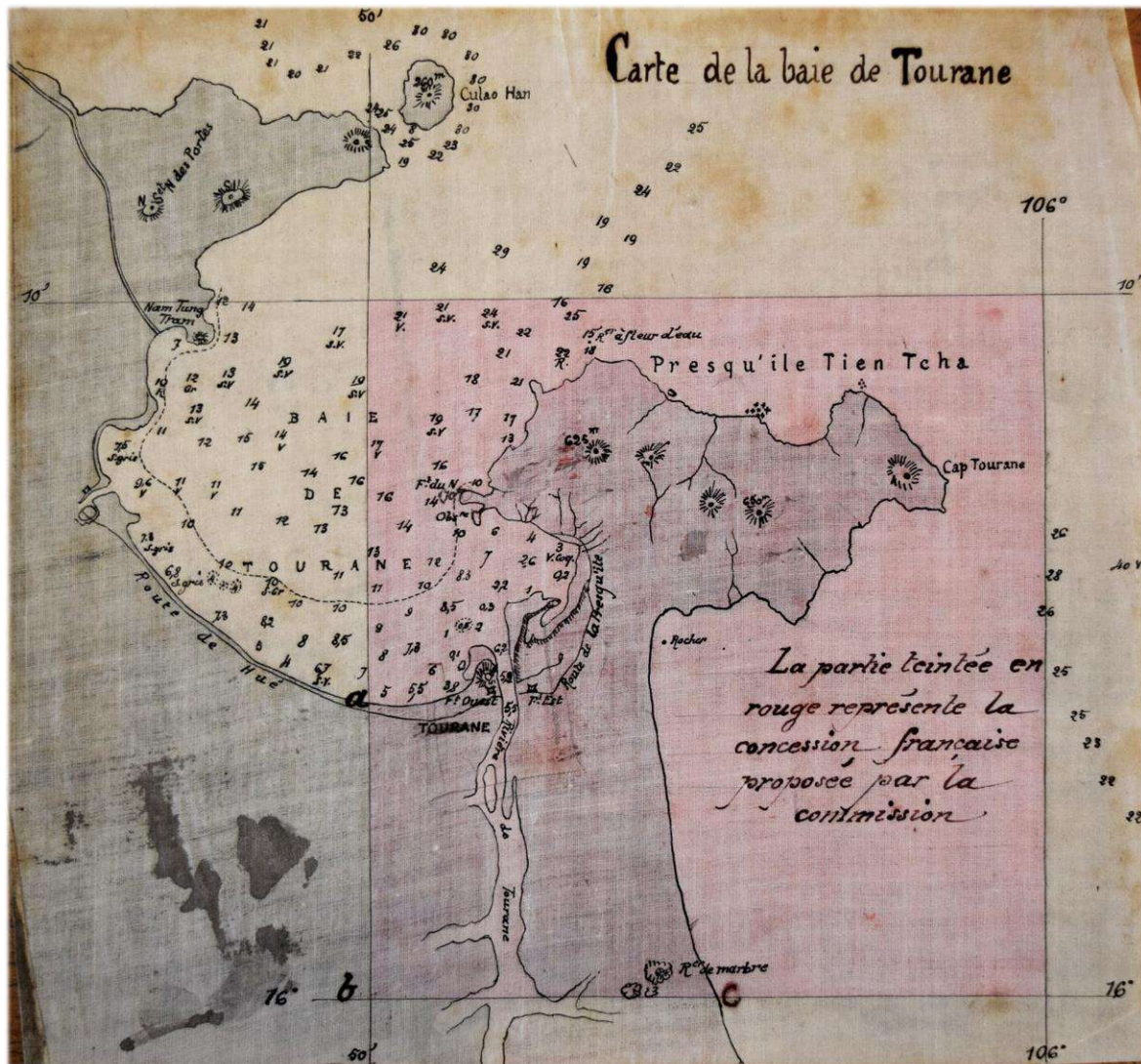


Fig. 1. Map of the French concession of Tourane drawn by the Navelle Commission, c. March 1885. ANOM, FM, SG (Indo), AF, 107, F 20 (2).

Responding to the will expressed by the Commission, Lemaire adopted a relatively ambiguous discourse: while he supported several of the conditions suggested for rooting French rule, he nevertheless was very critical about the proposed area for the concessions, particularly for Tourane, judging that they overstepped the framework of the regime instituted by the protectorate. He believed the role of France should be distributed over the entire kingdom and not concentrated on certain locations that would inevitably resemble, under such conditions, a territorial annexation. As for the expected commercial and industrial development, he asserted that it could only come about progressively. He proposed to the MNC to down scale the territorial aspirations advocated by the Commission, casting aside the proposal to include Tiên Sa peninsula, and expressing the wish that the southern and western limits be brought back to the limits of the dwellings at the mouth of the river. Answering the issue of extending the concession boundaries to accommodate future commercial, industrial and demographic growth, he put forward the possibility for those interested to buy land around the concession, when the need would arise. On this point, he took as a model the French concession in Shanghai [Ibid. Lemaire to MNC].

Nevertheless, neither the Commission's report nor Lemaire criticism seem to have been exposed after the ratification of the Patenôtre Treaty (3 Feb. 1886). It is certain that the conferences

mentioned therein never were organized, since the French and Vietnamese sources contain no trace of them.<sup>11</sup> However, the form of territorial appropriation planned in 1885 remained quite present in certain administrative documents [ANOM, GGI, F (03), 64202. Report from Hector, 29 Dec.1887].<sup>12</sup> Besides, two months before the negotiations undertaken by Richaud, the Resident of France in Tourane (RFT) noted the advantages of setting the boundaries of the French concession so as to include: the Tiên Sa peninsula, where a deep water port could be developed; the western part of the bay, up to the Hải Vân Pass, to secure permanent access to the capital; and the coastal territory leading to Faïfo (*Hội An*), where the construction of a rail road linking the city to the harbour for the transport of goods should be foreseen [ANOM, GGI, F, 5990. RFT to Superior Resident of Annam (SRA), 1 Aug. 1888].<sup>13</sup> Moreover, while he recognized the existence of a first attempt at demarcation, conducted by the Commission, he noted its full report had been lost, and that Richaud had expressed his opinion neither concerning the western part of the bay nor on the subject of the strip linking Tourane to Faïfo [Ibid.].

According to the Vietnamese historians [Ngô Văn Minh 2007: 104], in Oct. 1888, the concession was covering about 10,000 ha. However, these dimensions seem to be excessive, as shown by an official letter from Mahé, where the latter noted the French concession was then covering an area of 1,366 ha [ANOM, GGI, F, 5992. Note sur la concession française de Tourane, 23 Oct. 1895]. All in all, it had been significantly reduced compared to the initial aspirations of the Commission, even after the official demarcation of its borders between 20–23 March 1889 (fig. 2) [ANOM, GGI, F, 5990].<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the extent of the conceded territory remained significant, and a new map was drawn less than three month later (fig. 3). The limits of the French concession appear much wider there and almost correspond to those recommended by the Commission, which makes us think that its report was rediscovered.

Indeed, there are only two main differences between the plans of Mar. 1885 and June 1889: the latter does not encompass the Marble Mountains, but, contrary to the aspirations of 1885, it extended along all the western shores of the bay, precisely as advocated by Mahé. They were surely included for geostrategic reasons relating to maritime and terrestrial considerations, since its southern extension was limited by the mandarinal Road. Its corresponded mainly to a political and strategic reason: the whole interest for the French was to insure “whatever the weather and sea conditions, communication with the capital” [Ibid. RFT to SRA]. Tourane, a port open to international trade, sole French city of Annam, was thereby to provide a base for support or retreat of the French military. A solution conceived as the *Cần Vương* threatened the colonial presence all the way to the Tonkin delta.

<sup>11</sup> In the ĐNTL, only a few details are given about the cession of Tourane (vol. 9, p. 429).

<sup>12</sup> “We must establish ourselves firmly in the coastline ports which are our supply line and base of operations towards the interior. It is necessary to take a very large amount of land in these ports.”

<sup>13</sup> Tourane was under construction; the French were already considering the delimitation of military lands and the construction of public warehouses for the port [NAVN4, RSA, série H, file 2936].

<sup>14</sup> Contrary to what many Vietnamese authors wrote (except for [Nguyễn Quang Trung Tiến 2021]), the concession was not only established on the left side of the *sông Hàn*, but also on its right bank and on the western shores of the *Tiên Sa* peninsula, until the Observatory islet (*hòn Mồ Côi*) – see fig. 2.



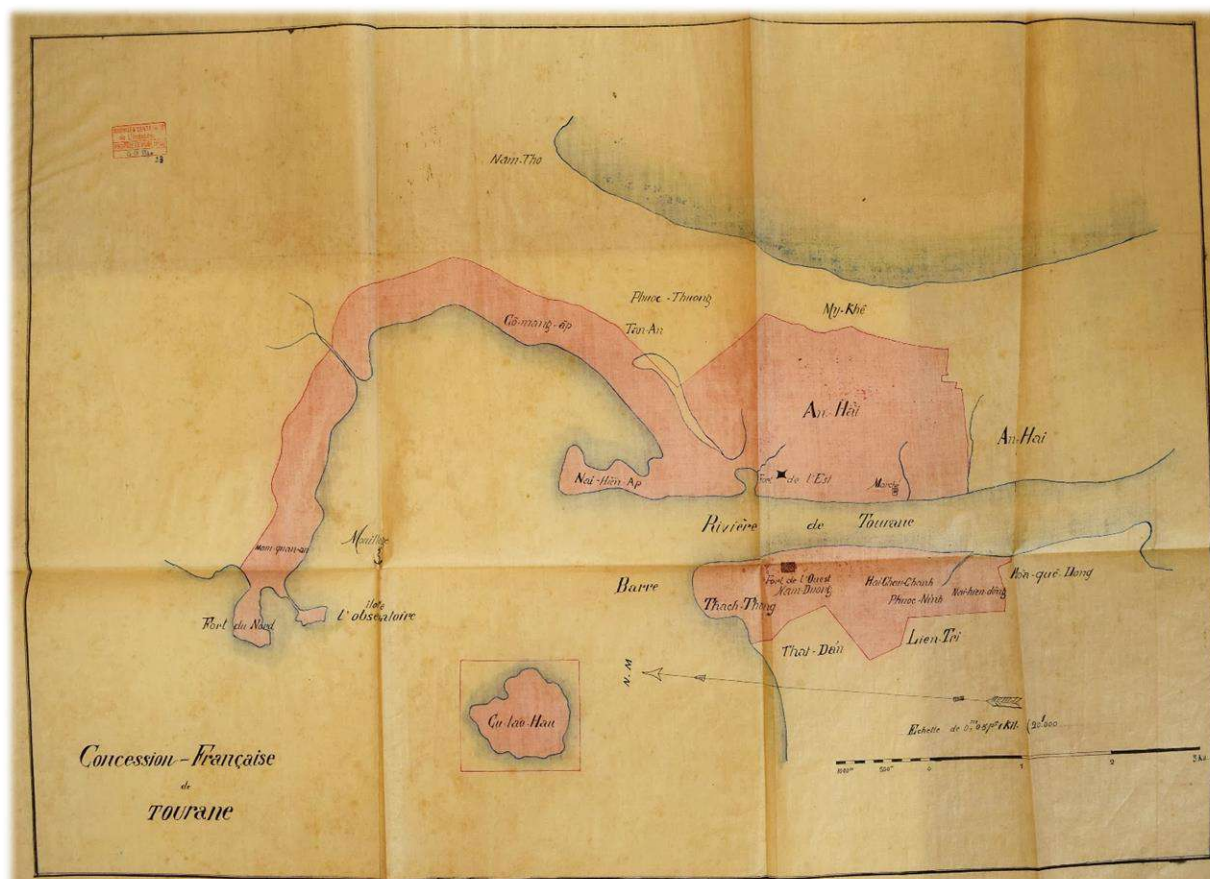


Fig. 2. “Concession française de Tourane” (1/20 000), Tourane, March 23, 1889. ANOM, GGI, F, 5990.

Finally, as was the case for the Chinese treaty ports, the question of demarcation of the Tourane concession became a source of tensions. In July 1889, emphasizing that “the area covered by the new map (fig. 3) is ten or even twenty times greater than the old one” (fig. 2), the *Cơ Mật* expressed its worries to the SRA and required major modifications [Ibid. *Cơ Mật* to SRA, 19 July & 9 Aug. 1889].

The strategy pursued in Tourane therefore looks very much like territorial “nibbling away”, as practiced in Shanghai or *Hà Nội* [Papin 2001: 227], with the difference that it was based here on considerations rooted in the past, which aimed precisely to break with previously existing models, to achieve mastery over an immediately very extensive territory. It is interesting to note that this policy ran up against the distrust of the *Cơ Mật* and that the French authorities revised their initial ambitions downward, at least until the end of the 19th century<sup>15</sup>, when the gigantic dimensions sketched in 1885 were finally approved formally.

<sup>15</sup> GG Piquet finally followed up the requests made by the *Cơ Mật*. The boundaries drawn in June 1889 were renegotiated and progressively adopted between 1892–1901. All in all, the extension of the concession followed the development of the port city [ANOM, GGI, F, 5990; NAVN4, RSA, E, 2493].

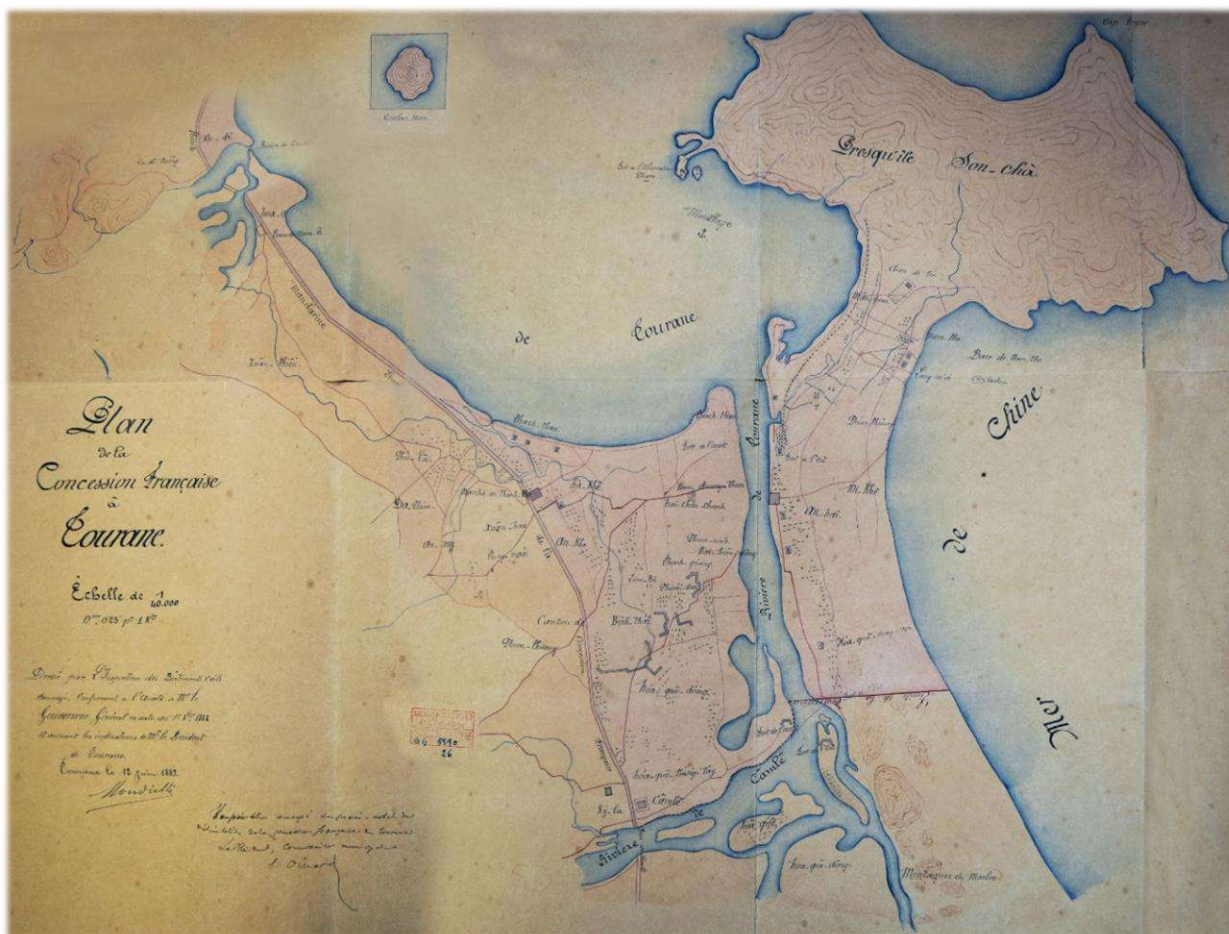


Fig. 3. Inspecteur des Bâtiments Civils, “Plan de la concession française de Tourane” (1/40 000), June 12, 1889. ANOM, GGI, F, 5990.

### Conclusion

All in all, the members of the Navelle Commission were the initiators — or at least the inspirers — of a new form of colonial domination in Indochina: the colonial enclave (or “micro-colony”) inside the territory of a protectorate.

The wishes and recommendations that they expressed in 1885 clearly took a stand in favor of sinking roots in a location, founded on a complete revision of the concession model that had prevailed until then in the open ports of Indochina. It was necessary to shift from a narrow to a gigantic vision to ensure definitive territorial control. This is precisely what flowed from the 1 Oct. 1888 ordinance, first for Tourane, then for *Hà Nội* and *Hải Phòng*. For instance, *Hà Nội* “extended over about 800 hectares” by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the concession, having become “a suburban zone by 1899, covered 5200 hectares” [Papin 2001: 226]<sup>16</sup>. As for Tourane, its limits were extended on 15 Jan. 1901 [Võ Văn Đạt 2019: 237–238], and other demands were formulated in the same logic in the 1930s [NAVN4, RSA, E, 2493], as the development of the port city displayed a genuine impetus.

Even more, the Commission had recommended to “Frenchified” these colonial enclaves to permit a fixed and durable settlement. In 1888 however, the first French installations, both public and

<sup>16</sup> A new request was also made by J. Decoux on 31 May 1942 [NAVN4, RSA, D, 1470].



private, remained under the jurisdiction of *Đại Nam* law; which meant the French did not hold them in full ownership, since they did not possess them juridically. On 1 Aug. 1888, three months before the proclamation of the ordinance, Mahé did not fail to note the prevailing legal situation, adding that “French laws concerning property” should become “the only ones in force” inside the concession. He conceived this change as an important decision, the consequences of which would be irreversible: “The Government of the protectorate would become the absolute master, could sell or grant concessions of land, perceive fiscal navigation, municipal and other rights” [ANOM, GGI, F, 5990]. Note that while the Commission had conceived the measure as one to be applied only in the framework of the new concession system to be applied in *Xuân Đài* and Tourane, in the end, the ordinance obtained by Richaud applied to two other key points of the peninsula: *Hà Nội* and *Hải Phòng*.

At a time when efforts were concentrated on repressing the *Cần Vương*, the formula could only be a colonial advantage. Its ambiguous character was underlined by contemporary observers, which is understandable since Annam remained juridically a protectorate (*La République française*, 1 Dec. 1888). In truth, Richaud’s move was far from adventurous: by methodically using the juridical vagueness that enveloped the concessionary clauses of the Patenôtre Treaty, it permitted a localised transfer of sovereignty, a sort of expropriation of slabs of Vietnamese territory, what is more in politically or economically strategic locations.

More broadly, this decision represented an additional step in the intrusive process used by France to establish a framework that placed *Đại Nam* under its tutelage. Viewed through a filter, it explains why the official doctrine came to assimilate the three concessions to colonies, even though they had been placed under the guidance of the Superior residents of Annam and Tonkin. From the administrative standpoint, their organization was also differentiated. Thus, the French concession of Tourane formed a distinct administrative unit from the other twelve provincial divisions of Annam. To this came to be added the establishment of municipalities, as early as 19 July 1888 for *Hà Nội* and *Hải Phòng*, and from 24 May 1889 in Tourane, where the municipal commission was sworn in on 31 Mar. 1892 [ANOM, GGI, F, 5992]. One way or the other, almost everything the Commission had suggest, was established.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Tourane was returned to the Vietnamese at the beginning of 1950 [ANOM, 1HCI, 160; NAVN1, Cabinet du chef de l’État du Việt Nam, E, 307].

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## AN IMAGINED WORSHIP: LOCALITIES AND CREATION OF REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ĐẠO MẪU

Camille Senepin

**Abstract.** The worship of the Four Palace [*Tứ Phủ*], recently named *Đạo Mẫu* [Mothers Goddesses's Religion] can be found in Vietnam and is mainly present in the Northern part of the country. After years of prohibition and stigmatization, this Four Palaces are inscribed as Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Unesco in December 2016. The worship and its possession ritual [*lên đồng*] were mostly analysed in Hanoi by Western and Vietnamese researchers. In this article, the author proposes an analysis of the dynamics of the Four Palaces outside Hanoi, linked to the semantic transformation taking place within the worship. The importance of the locality and how specific places can create singular discourses about the deities, the mediums and the devotees are emphasized in this communication. The author demonstrates that the *Đạo Mẫu* community is imagined. Nevertheless, the author analyses how the locality can modify the representations and the perceptions of the spirits embodied by the medium, depending on the localisation of the speakers. This paper also highlighted the consequences of the heritagization on the vocabulary and the contemporary practices, and how it can change the ones that are considered unorthodox. In this analysis the author also mentions the significance of those discourses inside the social medias, mostly on Facebook, which is one of the contemporary challenges of the worship.

**Keywords:** anthropology, religion, heritage, possession worship, vocabulary transformation, moral geography.

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### Introduction

*“The tenth Prince [Ông Hoàng Mười] is from Nghệ An, he is from our home. Yes, but it's in Nam Định that he carries out more, he is important there!”*

It was during a hot afternoon in May 2020 in Northern Vietnam, Ông Thắng and Chị Bích<sup>1</sup>, both followers of the “Four Palaces” [*Tứ phủ*], had this debate regarding the roots of the tenth Mandarin [Ông Hoàng Mười], in the context of my inquiries on the spirit possession ritual [*lên đồng*]. I had arrived several days ago in Phủ Dầy, a northern Vietnamese place of worship constituted of a dozens of temples. Located in the village *Kim Thái*, *Nam Định* province, this place houses Liễu Hạnh<sup>2</sup>'s mausoleum. This spirit is important within the northern practice of the worship of the Four Palaces. She would have supposedly lived in *Nam Định* province, place of her physical death. Thus, a majority of northern followers and spirit-mediums consider *Nam Định* province as the “heart of the worship of the Four Palaces”. This worship is also called the Mothers Goddesses worship [*Thờ Mẫu*], or, more recently, the Mothers Goddesses religion [*Đạo Mẫu*]. Besides a set of offering practices and propitiatory rituals, mediums of the Four Palaces organize possession rituals several times a year.

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been anonymized.

<sup>2</sup> See Dror [2007] for more information regarding the earthly life of Liễu Hạnh.

These religious specialists are followed by more or less important number of devotees, depending on the medium's reputation. This worship was stigmatized and forbidden for years during the repression against "superstitions" [*mê tín dị đoan*]. Nowadays, the worship of the Four Palaces is pervasive in Vietnam, especially since its inscription as Intangible Cultural Heritage in December 2016. The worship of the Four Palaces has been studied and described by many authors since the 1950s (see in particular [Chauvet 2012], [Durand 1959], [Endres 2011], [Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996], [Nguyen Thi Hien 2015], [Simon et Simon-Barouh 1973], [Tran Van Toan 1966]). Nevertheless, many questions remain, even more since the heritagization of the worship in 2016. Most of the researchers have worked in the North of Vietnam, mainly in Hanoi, or have described the Northern form of the Four Palaces. If researchers like Kirsten Endres [2011] and Claire Chauvet [2012] studied, more or less deeply, the question of pilgrimages, they did not really explore the local peculiarities and practices of the Four Palaces that can be present in different places in Vietnam. It is important to focus on locality and leave the capital city in order to have a better understanding of the Four Palaces and its issues in the different part of Vietnam.

In this article, I will seek to understand the contemporary transformations that affect the Four Palaces by analysing the modifications of language, as new terminologies have been deployed since the beginning of the 21st century and the recent worship's acceptance in Vietnam. I will emphasize the importance of the locality in the appearance of this terminology, and this analyse will be conducted with the concept of "imagined community" proposed by Benedict Anderson [2006]. In the first place, I will present the differences between the Northern rituals and those present in the Center of Vietnam, and how it can affect the ritual vocabulary. I will focus on locality as a main factor of variation, and how it can create "moral geography". By moral geography, I am inspired by David Smith's proposal [2000] which wishes to demonstrate that "geographical context is significant to moral practice" (preface VIII). In this article, by moral geography I mean the way humans create a moral imaginary, full of positive or negative conceptions, which they apply to other human groups, according to their physical locations. Groups from a particular place are expected to behave and think in a particular way, based on their location. By analysing moral geographies in etic ways, it is possible to understand how people locate other groups, physically and morally, and by extension themselves.

This paper will analyse how the semantic changes that appeared in recent years in Vietnam reveal modifications in the way the Four Palaces is perceived today in the country. Finally, I will examine how these developments have created new local representations, leading to the heritagization of the Four Palaces in 2016. This study stems from four fieldworks I conducted in Vietnam between 2017 and 2020. While materials used in this paper are from several participant observations of *lên đồng*, interviews with mediums, most of the data come from informal discussions with devotees and mediums. As the COVID-19 pandemic broke out I was not able to conduct fieldwork in *Huế* in 2020 and 2021 as planned, so I rely on the works of several researchers [Bertrand 1996; Dong Vinh 1999; Tran Van Toan 1966,1967] who conducted fieldwork in *Huế*<sup>3</sup> to complete the analysis in this article.

### **The worship of the Four Palaces: a variety of practices**

As I mentioned in the introduction, the worship of the Four Palaces has been studied by several authors, so as its possession ritual. The vocation of this article is not to produce an umpteenth description of the Four Palaces nor the conduct of the ritual, I will concentrate here on the differences between the Northern and Central rituals in *Huế* and show how it can affect the worship's conception.

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<sup>3</sup> I am planning a fieldwork in *Huế* for the end of 2021.



It is quite common to hear the medium say that thirty-six spirits make up the worship. These spirits live in Four Palaces [*Tứ phủ*]:

- the Heaven Palace [*Thiên phủ*]
- the Mountains and Forests Palace [*Nhạc phủ*]
- the Water Palace [*Thoái phủ or Thủy Phủ*]
- the Earth Palace [*Địa phủ*]

The Mothers [*Mẫu or Thánh Mẫu*] rules the Palaces. Next come the Mandarins [*Quan Lớn*], then the Ladies [*Châu*], the Princes [*Ông Hoàng*], the Damsels [*Cô*], and finally the Little Princes [*Cậu*]. In fact this number is variable, and the spirits mentioned are not always the same. Each medium and devotees has their own vision of the worship, and how it should be practiced. Unlike to what the recent heritagization of the Four Palaces might suggest, the worship practices are not consistent. Differences are defined by the local context although this idea is absent of the UNESCO's consideration. In the North of Vietnam, the mediums embody the spirits following the hierarchical order during the possession ritual [*lên đồng*], the Mothers making only a brief descent and are not personified. Tran Van Toan [1966: 245] notices several differences in Huế: the Mothers are sometimes embodied and danced like the other spirits. Furthermore, the possession ritual begins with the descent of the female spirits [Ibid.], and not with the Mandarins. Most of the time is taken by the manifestation of the spirits of the Mount and Forest Palace [Ibid.: 247]. Finally, whereas in the North the medium officiates alone, a co-celebration is noticeable in Huế: several religious specialists embody the spirits from the same rank all at once<sup>4</sup> [Ibid.: 245], activity that Didier Bertrand also noticed [1996: 278, 279]. This co-celebration is still practiced by mediums from the Center of Vietnam nowadays, as I was able to watch through videos shot in 2017 at *Nguyệt Du Cung* Temple, where mediums from Huế were invited to perform.

Tran Van Toan also notes that only rich people in Central Vietnam can embody spirits from higher ranks, and that the spirits of the Mountains and Forests are more mostly embodied by workers [1966: 89]. This difference cannot be found today in the North of the country and has not been noted by other researchers who have worked on northern Vietnam. However, the question of wealth is quite interesting: the Four Palaces rituals need a large amount of money to be conducted correctly. A lot of devotees consider the worship as a “religion for rich people”. The major expenditure required by the worship was strongly criticized by the Vietnamese government between the 1950s and 1990s. However, since the Four Palaces' inscription as Intangible Heritage of the UNESCO, items requiring significant expenditure, such as ceremonial robes or votive objects, are now highlighted and can be used to represent Vietnamese culture, as it is possible to see in Women Museum in Hanoi [*Bảo tàng Phụ nữ Việt Nam*] where we can find an exhibition about *Đạo Mẫu* (Fig. 1). Once, for the government, those objects were seen as useless and a wasteful use of money, while they are now one of the main components of the heritagization of the worship. The process of transformation in the Vietnamese society that led to the acceptance of the Four Palaces in the Vietnamese public space are complex. It follows a will of the Party since the *Đổi mới* in 1986 [see Malarney 2002] but also the ambition of some Vietnamese researchers to rehabilitate the worship, particularly thanks to the works of Ngô Đức Thịnh, who leded fieldwork in *Nam Định* [1996, 1999, 2003].

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<sup>4</sup> Only the Mother of the Mount and Forest Palace can be embodied with spirits of lower rank [Ibid.: 245].



**Fig. 1.** Exhibition in the Women Museum, 2018. *Photo by the author*

Those transformations lead to a modification of the position of the worship of the Four Palaces, which is very popular nowadays. While it was banned for almost forty years, it is now possible to see it on television, on the internet or on a theatre stage. The worship's position on internet deserves particular attention and should be more investigate. Social medias like Facebook, YouTube and more recently TikTok are a fresh space for information's transmission, self-representation, or streaming of rituals directly by the devotees, while the ones present in the official broadcast channels are highly smoothed, which do not correspond with the daily ritual practice of the devotees. Voices are being raised against these activities, which are seen as a commodification of the Four Palaces, away from the worship's "good practice". Despite a desire to unify the worship, whether it comes from the Party or the mediums, through medias or through the inscription as Intangible Cultural Heritage, several visions of worship can still be found, especially as different perspectives exist among practitioners. As Shawn Malarney points out, "what we have is a cacophony of voices, each defining its own vision of how things should be" [2002: 3]. The first notable differences concerning the worship of the Four Palaces is the vocabulary transformations, consequences of contemporary mutations of the worship.

### Semantic transformation as a tool to understand contemporary and local changes

It is striking to observe that the vocabulary linked to the Four Palaces is multiple. First of all, in France, the translation of “worship of the Four Palaces” is adopted since Maurice Durand's monograph [1959] and the work of Simon and Simon-Barouh [1973]. However, in Vietnam there are at least four terms to talk about this worship. The first one is *Tứ phủ*, meaning Four Palaces, which is the translation used in English and French. The second is *Thờ Mẫu*, which could be translated as Worship of the Mothers. The third one is *Tam phủ*, which means Three Palaces. The last and most recent one is *Đạo Mẫu*, which can be translated as Religion of the Mothers. Then, why speak of three [*Tam phủ*] or four Palaces [*Tứ phủ*]? According to several interlocutors, the worship initially included only three Palaces. Several followers said that a fourth Palace was added to the worship belatedly. While Kirsten Endres [2011] and Thaveeporn Vasavakul [2003] note that the Palace of Mountains and Forests was the one that would have been added, several worship's followers pointed out to me that it was rather the Palace of the Earth. The debate concerning the number of Palaces is still ongoing today, researchers and religious specialists do not agree among themselves on the exact origin of the Palaces. It is striking to see that *Tam phủ* is the chosen name for the worship's UNESCO inscription<sup>5</sup> (Fig.2). In addition to the fact that the UNESCO's investigation was mainly conducted in *Nam Định*'s province, therefore limiting the analysis of different practices, *Tam phủ* is rarely used in the discourses the followers. The use of this term reveals a dysfunction between the international institution's language, and by extension the State, and rituals practices.



**Fig. 2.** UNESCO convention displayed on a wall in Nguyệt Du Cung temple, 2020. *Photo by the author*

According to Dorais and Nguyen Huy [1998], the addition of a fourth Palace would be the consequence of a redefinition of Vietnamese cosmographic thought at the end of the Chinese occupation, and “perhaps the erasure of prehistoric Viet religion behind the religious philosophies introduced from China” [Ibid: 193]. The influence of Taoism and Chinese culture is not insignificant,

<sup>5</sup> The full name is “Practices related to the Viet beliefs in the Mother Goddesses of Three Realms”, or “*Tin ngưỡng thờ Mẫu Tam Phủ của Người Việt*”.



as the construction of deities' hierarchical construction is not unlike that of Taoism. Nevertheless, I will not develop here these questions, already evoked in the works of Durand [1959], Nguyen Thi Hien [2015] and Simon and Simon-Barouh [1973], but rather I will focus later in this paper on the influence of the Cham, which has not been mentioned much in the context of the Four Palaces.

Dorais and Nguyen Huy also signal that this worship has Vietnamese particularities because of the women predominance in ritual practice [Ibid: 194]. I would qualify this statement by pointing out that beyond the female figures, whether divine or earthly, the spirits of the Four Palaces are all, more or less, heroes who have contributed to the victories of the *Đại Việt* and its administrative and social organization. However, focusing on the presence of divine or earthly feminine figures in the Four Palaces fails to consider the fact that numerous spirits are linked to significant historical characters of *Đại Việt* history. This might be a better indication of the worship's indigenous character. The Vietnamese Party seeks to emphasize this point, in order to make the worship a Vietnamese and orthodox religion, like the "state functionalism" that Malarney [2002] describes, where high-ranking Party members seek to use ritual for political and ideological purposes, like using the UNESCO's inscription to have a better monitoring on the worship.

It is striking to see that these terminological variations occur rapidly. Before Ngô Đức Thịnh's book [1996], that suggested the term *Đạo Mẫu*, the notion of "religion of the Mothers" was hardly used in common language. Nowadays, it became a term that we can easily find, and was adopted by most of the devotees. Since 2017 and my first fieldwork in Vietnam, I have witnessed the increasing use of this term, which is derived from a recent invention created by Vietnamese folklorists [Endres 2011]. By qualifying it as *Đạo* [religion], these intellectuals took part in the recent rewriting of the Four Palaces, taking it out the realm of "superstitions" and placing it in "modern" Vietnam, where it is accepted, even encouraged if it follows state directives. This transformation is the result of a vision change at the state level since 1986, but also due to the efforts of several Vietnamese researchers who have sought to legitimize this "folk religion" within nationalist and cultural terms [Norton 2009]. Although some Vietnamese people still consider this worship as superstitious and backward, it is worthy of noting that many followers and mediums have adopted the revolutionary discourse, while following some of the Party's directives (see notably [Endres 2011; Norton 2009]). Thus, in the discourses of mediums and followers, orthodox practices are considered as beneficial and appropriate, while others are rejected because they still are considered as superstitious [Ibid].

The utilization of the term "*Đạo*" is even more significant as Vietnam has not recognised *Đạo Mẫu* as an "official religion"<sup>6</sup> by the State. This difference is noticeable in the official name given to the worship in UNESCO, where belief [*tín ngưỡng*] is used, rather than religion [*Đạo*], thereby limiting the religious character of worship. It is interesting to draw a parallel between the Four Palaces and Hòa Hảo Buddhism and Caodaism cult that have managed to achieve the status of "official religions" according to an official decision, not without sacrifices. Jérémy Jammes [2011] notes in the case of Caodaism that despite Vietnamese directives regarding religious freedom, only the orthodox branches of the cult receive the necessary authorisations to broadcast announcement during religious ceremonies, to carry out media activities, or proselytizing [Ibid: 283]. If several mediums seek to organise themselves into an association to organise the Four Palaces in order to become an "official religion", one can wonder what impact this can have on their practice. Further recognition does not imply absence of state interference, quite the contrary in fact. Philip Taylor [2004] stresses this point which may seem paradoxical. In the context of the *Bà Chúa Xứ* [Lady of the Realm] worship

<sup>6</sup> I thank Binh Tran, PhD Student in Auckland University for this reminder.



in southern Vietnam, the contemporary renewed practice is due to an increased presence of the state and not as an absence of it, as the Party has shaped the worship's organisation there [Ibid: 24, 25]. Thus, as Oscar Saleminck notes, "heritagisation constitutes an appropriation of the past and thus an attempt to control the future by certain elites that alienate other groups in the process" [2016: 314]. In the case of the Four Palaces, it is possible to imagine that its heritagization and its possible ratification as an "official religion" will not lead to greater freedom but rather a process of a standardization of practices, in favour of the one that have the preference of the state.

Besides the semantic changes concerning the worship, the names attributed to the mediums also gradually transformed. Maurice Durand uses the terms *bà đồng* and *cô đồng* in his book [1959] to refer to female mediums. *Bà đồng* and *ông đồng* are the most commonly used terms in anthropological literature to refer to female and male mediums. Yet, in practice, there are a multitude of terminologies to define a medium of the Four Palace. For example, *Cụ đồng* refers to old mediums, *Tân đồng* to a young medium who has been performing for a maximum of three years, or *Đồng thầy* is used for the mediums masters, sharing their knowledge and training new mediums (see [Endres 2011] on training of mediums). Nowadays, it seems that the title *Thanh đồng* is the most widely used by the devotees. *Thanh* represents purity, while *đồng* refers to mediumship. This term is used to refer to mediums whether they are men or women. The widening acceptance of this denomination today is interesting because it seems to belong initially to Trần Hưng Đạo worship and was only used for men as Pham Quynh Phuong notes in her book [2009]. While Trần Hưng Đạo and the Four Palaces worship were distinct, with different religious specialists separated by gender, they seem to combine since the 1990's. By using *thanh đồng* to refer to the mediums of the Four Palaces, it no longer discriminates them according to gender<sup>7</sup> while erasing the previous distinction between Trần Hưng Đạo and the Four Palaces worship.

By analysing the semantic changes concerning the worship of the Four Palaces, we can have a greater view of contemporary dynamics that have gone and still go through the worship. The Vietnamese State's change in policy has a significant influence over the new status of the Four Palaces, although the followers of the worship have also played an important role in it.

### Locality and relative imagination of the Four Palaces

The followers' spatial location in the region of Vietnam takes a part in the relationship and appropriation of the spirits, but also in the relationship between the followers themselves. The principal temples where the spirits of the Four Palaces are venerated are related to their earthly life and achievement. Here are a few examples: the main temple of the Tenth Prince [*Ông Hoàng Mười*] is located in *Nghệ An* province, his supposed origin. The Temple of the Seventh Prince [*Ông Hoàng Bảy*] is located in *Lào Cai*, near the Chinese border. The main temple of *Thiên Y A Na* is in *Huế*. Finally, the high place of worship of *Liễu Hạnh* is *Phủ Dầy*. Those places are related to the spirits' activities during their earthly life: it can be the place of their births or deaths, as the Tenth Prince or *Liễu Hạnh* temples, where they worked or lived as the Seventh Prince or *Thiên Y A Na* principal temples. The location of these temples plays an important role in the links between the devotees and the spirits. *Nam Định* province followers, and those in northern Vietnam, consider *Liễu Hạnh* as the most important spirit of the Four Palaces, in contrast to followers living in the centre of the country, for whom *Thiên Y A Na* plays this role. These different take on of the worship are important in the follower's movements and perceptions. Several northern informants I talked to did not even deem

<sup>7</sup> Concerning gender in the Four Palaces, see in particular [Tran and Filax 2018].

that a form of *Tứ phủ* could exist in the centre of the country, or at least not a “real” one. While I have seen pilgrims from central and southern Vietnam come to the north, I have never heard of pilgrimages from the North to *Huế* or Ho Chi Minh City. This point highlights the cultural hegemony that the North of the country operates in the case of the Four Palaces.

Beyond this hegemony, it is worth to note that followers of the Four Palaces belong to an imagined community<sup>8</sup>. Imagined because this community shares particular conceptions, images and representations, without confronting them on a daily basis with other followers, but also without meeting all the practitioners of the Four Palaces. A distinction must be made between this imagined, extended community, which brings together the followers who share a common imagination, and the much more restricted community that is organised around a medium. The followers go on pilgrimage with the religious specialist, following him on his travels to different temples where he organises possession rituals. They get to know each other, discuss together, and create a common vision of the worship. Those different groups may meet at festivals, such as the *Phủ Dày* festival [*Lễ hội Phủ Dày*] in the North of the country (Fig. 3) or the *Hòn Chén* festival [*Lễ hội Điện Hòn Chén*] in *Huế*, or even in rituals organised in temples or on pilgrimage. The devotees confront their ideas and representations. During those discussions local importance given to certain spirits, different ritual practices or even differences concerning the spirits’ hagiographies can be noted and discussed.

During these encounters, it is also possible to see the representations apply directly to the groups according to their origins. During my fieldwork in *Phủ Dày*, up to three mediums were present each day to organise possession rituals. Coming from Hanoi, *Hải Dương* or *Nghệ An* province, I had to choose which ritual to attend. On one day, two ceremonies were held in parallel. One group of devotees was coming from *Hải Dương*, while the second was arriving from Hanoi. When I asked Tung, one of the temple residents, which ceremony would be more interesting, he replied without hesitation to go to the Hanoi group. According to him, this group was more interesting because it came from the capital, even if the medium was not particularly well known nor talented. The ceremony had a few hitches, notably because of the large number of ghosts that visited some of the spectators. The fact that I was directed to this medium was clearly due to his origin. Being from the capital is a sign of success for several reasons. The first is that many famous mediums live in Hanoi. The second is the historical opposition between capital and province, and even more between rural and urban areas. A form of “moral geography” is indeed being set up: images and preconceptions are projected on what the mediums of a particular place should be and should behave. Thus, the mediums of *Phủ Dày* are supposed to be guarantors of a certain form of “tradition”, while the Hanoian mediums are supposedly wealthier, offering very aesthetic rituals. Obviously, reality rarely fits these projected images. It is important to understand how these projected images are constructed, and what consequences they may have on the ritual practice of worship which should be the object of future research.

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<sup>8</sup> I borrow this expression from Benedict Anderson [2006].



**Fig. 3.** Procession during *Phủ Dầy* festival, 2018. Photo by the author

Locality matters in the representation of worship itself. Dong Vinh points out that for devotees in central Vietnam, the country is ruled by three deities: *Liễu Hạnh* in the North, *Thiên Y A Na* in the centre, and *Bà Đen* in the south [1999: 77]. In addition, Tran Van Toan notes that the followers in the centre of the country seem to attach a great importance to the spirits of the Mountains and Forests, remnant with the past relations with the Cham<sup>9</sup> [1966: 90]. The Cham influence has been erased in favour of a culturally united and dominant Vietnam, and, as I suggest before, is too often forgotten in the analysis of the Four Palaces. However, traces of the influence of the ancient kingdom of Champa are still visible today in the Four Palaces, whether through the Vietnamisation of the goddess Po Nagar (see [Nguyen 1995]) or in the importance of the spirits of the Mountains and Forests (see [Tran Van Toan 1966 and 1967]). These relations commonalities, borrowings and syncretism that have taken place between Cham and Kinh<sup>10</sup> since the conquest led by the *Đại Việt* are still too often underestimated and cannot be ignored. Without seeking to achieve a complete historical analysis of the history of the Four Palaces worship in central Vietnam, it is important to note the differences in practices, imaginations and symbols between the rituals conducted in the North of the country and those present in *Huế*.

<sup>9</sup> The Cham were the majority ethnic group of the Champa kingdom, which dominated for a long time central and southern Vietnam.

<sup>10</sup> Also called Viet, the Kinh are the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam.

## Conclusion

The contemporary transformations of the worship of the Four Palaces are the consequences of actions conducted by the Vietnamese government, along with several researchers, but it is also the result of the devotees' efforts to regain ownership over their ritual practices. In that sense, we can follow the Vietnam's ongoing national construction through the worship. As I have shown, the modification of the vocabulary of the Four Palaces allows us to grasp on a larger scale the contemporary transformations of the worship. The importance of the localities is not insignificant as demonstrated in this article, and indicates how representations and perceptions are perpetually changing, not unrelated to the country's long separation. Moral geography is a useful tool that researchers can use to understand the imaginary constructed between several groups, and can explain the community dynamics. Thus, we can extend Catherine Bell's theory about ritualization to the worship of the Four Places, which says that ritualization "does not see how it actively creates place, force, event and tradition, how it redefines or generates the circumstances to which it is responding" even if ritualization is supposed to be a response to place, force, event and tradition [Bell 2009: 109]. In the case of contemporary *Đạo Mẫu*, if the worship sees itself as a response to an ancestral tradition, in specific places with particular events, but it does not see how the worship creates a hegemonic tradition in northern Vietnam. The domination of the northern practices forgets, even ignores, the different forms of local practices such as the one in *Huế* and imposes semantic transformations. Consequently, it is necessary to move away from the north of Vietnam and its hegemonic circle of influence to capture aspects of contemporary worship that is too frequently omitted.

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**THE GENERAL BUDDHIST ASSOCIATION OF VIETNAM 1951–1964  
(TỔNG HỘI PHẬT GIÁO VIỆT NAM): A FORGOTTEN STEP TOWARDS  
THE 1964 BUDDHIST CHURCH**  
**Guilhem Cousin-Thorez**

**Abstract.** This paper provides an overview of the Buddhist community in the 50s and 60s, addressing the creation of the first national Buddhist association: the General Buddhist Association of Vietnam (Tổng Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam, GBA). Most academic works sum up the GBA to the date of its foundation by three regional delegations of Buddhists believers in May 1951, and its participation in the political crisis of 1963, the so-called Buddhist Crisis. Its genesis, the internal structures of this first national association, the philosophy and new national narrative of its leaders, their conflictual and distant relationship with secular power and other Buddhists group, remains largely unknown. Providing a new set of contextual elements, this analysis of the GBA's history will contribute to our understanding of Vietnamese Buddhism history in the 20th century, in its continuities and inconsistencies. Essentially a failed first attempt to build a Buddhist “church” the history of the GBA is highly revealing of the long-standing aspirations of its creators and should be understood as a transitional step between early reform movement and the 1964 UBC. Emphasizing on cultural, social, and political matters, this paper is mainly based on barely used primary sources available in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** 1963, General Buddhist Association of Vietnam, Buddhism, Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, State of Vietnam, Republic of South Vietnam.

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### **Introduction**

In 1963, a political crisis erupted in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN)<sup>1</sup>, when in May 1963, clerics and laymen of Central Vietnam, led by the monk Thich Tri Quang (*Thích Trí Quang*), began to protest loudly against the president Ngo Dinh Diem (*Ngô Đình Diệm*) (ruling from 1954 to late 1963) after an incident involving military and civilians in Hue, resulting in the death of 9 persons. A Catholic, Diem was accused of long-standing persecutions against the Buddhist majority. A month later, the crisis eventually spread to the South, in Saigon, with the public immolation of Thich Quang Duc (*Thích Quảng Đức*) on June 11, protesting the inaction of the government. In the capital city, Thich Tam Chau (*Thích Tâm Châu*), a northern refugee, had took the head of the struggle movement, and played a prominent role in the subsequent protests, eventually leading to the downfall of Ngo Dinh Diem, who was assassinated on November 2. The main actors of the Buddhist struggle then combined their forces and created a new Buddhist group on 4 January 1964, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBC, *Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam Thống Nhất*, 1964–1981). This new Church was soon involved in continuous political struggle with the successive governments of the RVN, a struggle which would continue until 1972. In the following decade, Thich Tri Quang and Thich Tam

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<sup>1</sup> After the 1954 division of Vietnam, the southern half became the Republic of Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem was its first president from 1955 to 1963.

Chau would often be regarded as the leaders of politicized Buddhism, of the anti and pro-government tendencies respectively. What is called today the Buddhist Crisis of 1963 is one of the major political events that occurred in the RVN. The images of demonstrations, and especially the picture of Quang Đức's suicide being among the most striking of the Vietnam War. Yet, to this day, assessments on the origins of this Crisis remains elusive<sup>2</sup>.

The three monks mentioned above, and numerous lesser known, but influential Vietnamese monks active during the Crisis and after, were trained and played a prominent role in the activities of an important, but highly overlooked Buddhist group, the General Buddhist Association of Vietnam (GBA, *Tổng Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam*, 1951–1964), established more than a decade earlier in the days of the previous State of Vietnam (SVN, 1949–1955). During the Crisis, it was in their capacity as leaders of this association that they took the head of the movement. While the Crisis itself and the post-1963 Buddhist struggle in Vietnam was discussed in several academic writings<sup>3</sup>, the decade before this era appear as a significant blind spot, affecting our understanding of the crisis, but also of the whole twentieth century's history of Buddhism in Vietnam. The foundation of the GBA is often only briefly mentioned, at best, while many academic works focus on the most striking and tardy details of the community's history, its politicization and frontal opposition to the ruling power, analyzing it practically without regard for the preceding decades, as a spontaneous phenomenon. This article emphasizes on this largely unknown period of the 1950s, within the scope of the SVN and RVN.

This article is the outcome of two research trips to Vietnam (November 2019 – February 2020 and March 2021 – ongoing). These trips allowed us to gather a first set of overlooked documents on the GBA, preserved in the Vietnam national archive centers. The center n°2 (TLLTQG2) in Ho Chi Minh City preserves the archives of the southern administrations from the colonial era to the 1976 reunification. In this article, we mostly relied on the Prime Minister of the State of Việt Nam fonds (1949–1954, noted PTTQG) and the First Republic of Vietnam fonds (1954–1963, noted RNV1). The center N°4 (TLLTQG4) in Đà Lạt preserves the archives of the local administrations covering Central Vietnam, for the same period. In this article, we mostly relied on the Central Governor of SVN fonds (1946–1954, noted CG) and Representant of the RVN in Central Vietnam fonds (1955–1969, noted TĐB). So far, because of the pandemic situation, it was impossible to access to Center n°1, where the northern administrations archives are kept.

Documents available in these centers are of two types. The majority deals with isolated, local events, and are too sparse and inconsistent to be used for a large, relevant comparative study. The second type, which is rarer, provided either by the main institutions of the GBA, or by the French and Vietnamese administrations, concerns general issues. Although few in number, it is these second type documents that we have sought to exploit in depth, the first type being used only to highlight practical situations. Of course, this article is also based on Vietnamese literature, some of it published by the Buddhist community itself during the period covered, often overlooked.

The sources available to study this time span are rather limited, which complicates the thorough analysis of the GBA. In their reports, French and Vietnamese administrations active in the 1950s focused their investigations and reports on other groups. These gap in documentation can be

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<sup>2</sup> For an important and seminal historical work on the course of the Buddhist crisis, and a comprehensive state of the art of research on this matter, see [Miller 2015]. This article is one of the rare works using Vietnamese archives and has significantly shaped our research.

<sup>3</sup> Among the main references on this topic, see [Topmiller 2002], [Mac Allister 2008].

explained by the lack of interest of the successive administrations towards a community often seen as politically weak, disunited, unable to represent a counter-power, nor a potential source of subversion. Consequently, the Buddhists received very little attention compared to other politically active institutional religions (Catholicism, Caodaism, and Hoa Hao Buddhism) or other political forces, like the Communist Party. Besides, most Vietnamese primary sources have only been truly accessible for about ten years.

As said, since we cannot study the activities of the GBA in depth, this article aims at shedding light on the outlines of the association, its genesis and its functioning and the background of its main actors, the monks. It also addresses the complex relationship of this organization with the Vietnamese power throughout most of the existence of the GBA.

### Context of the GBA's formation: the Buddhist *milieu* before 1951

In the decades preceding 1951, Buddhist circles had been through a two-decade long reformist movement, usually referred to as the *Phong Trào Chấn hưng Phật giáo*, the Buddhist renovation movement. The renovation movement can be summarized by: the use of Latinized Vietnamese (*Quốc Ngữ*), which allowed the translation and wide circulation of texts, backed up by an intense printing activity. The use of new organisational patterns, on an associative model, often operating as local clubs, which notably permitted a rising involvement of the laymen, especially of the youth. The local associations who merged to the GBA in 1951 are the outcome of this reform movement. In some cases, this led to a modest but meaningful reorganisation of the *Sangha*, the Buddhist monastic congregation. Old influential monks would then take charge of the education of a new generation of apprentice, in connection with the Buddhist associations, united around a common teaching, which was provided in modern training institutions [DeVido 2007, Mac Hale 2003]. The monks of this new generation were mostly born in the early 1920s, like Thich Tri Quang and Thich Tam Chau. They were trained by these associations and matured in a deep rethinking of the place of Buddhism in the national Vietnamese identity, through the discovery of the most ancient and glorious roots of Vietnamese Buddhism. [Miller 2015: 1912].

Between the August 1945 revolution<sup>4</sup> and the founding of the GBA in 1951, three of the main Buddhist associations of South, Central and North<sup>5</sup> Vietnam were reorganized, following new guidelines. So far, we have been unable to find substantial documents addressing the process behind the meeting of 1951. The idea of a national association was more ancient, however. During the colonial period, some calls for a national approach to the renovation of Buddhism were made, revealing a rather old desire of the actors of the movement, never put into effect. It is known that different members of the regional associations were already in regular contact before the August Revolution and had been involved in common projects [Nguyễn Lang 1998: ch. 26–29; Ninh Thị Sinh 2016]. They were now heading towards a new, more ambitious project: the creation of a national association.

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<sup>4</sup> In August 1945, Hồ Chí Minh's Viet Minh troops took control of the country, ending French and Japanese rule in Vietnam and establishing the independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

<sup>5</sup> In this article, the terms North, Central and South Vietnam always refer to the geographical limits of the three regions of the colonial era, respectively Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina, the first territorial perspective of Buddhist reformism during the colonial period. After the 1954 partition, Central Vietnam refers to the same area, minus the four provinces north to Quang Tri, part of the DRV.



### The Meeting of May 1951

For 4 days, from 6 to 9 May 1951, delegations representing the South (10 members), Central (34 members) and North Vietnam (16 members) met in Hue at the Tu Dam pagoda. Some remarks are necessary regarding the participants of this first meeting. First, the Vietnamese monks held a more prominent place than the laymen, as they were the official heads of the delegation (*Trưởng phái đoàn*). Furthermore, alongside the elderly monks were several younger ones, who had received their training from the associations of the colonial era. This fact will prove important later, since many of the most active monks during the Buddhist Crisis belonged to this younger generation. Among the Central and North delegations, for instance, were Thich Tri Quang and Thich Tam Chau. Finally, it should be noted that the delegates were exclusively of Vietnamese ethnicity, and male. The inclusion of ethnic minorities living in Vietnam (notably Khmers, but one could also think of the Hoa, the country's Chinese minority) did not seem to be a priority at that time. This relationship would evolve later, with the inclusion of Theravada Khmer Buddhists in the UBC. The wider involvement of women in the GBA also came later and was never really achieved effectively [TTL TQG4, CG 1604, 1].

After the meeting, the first administrative committee (*Ban Quản trị Trung Ương*) of the GBA was elected (Table 1):

In total, we can count eleven members from the Central region (blue), four from the North (orange) and three from the South (green). The domination of the Central region does not stop here and will be discussed later. A first version of the charter governing the functioning of the GBA was drawn up at the end of this meeting. This initial project attracts several comments.

### The GBA project

At first, it should be noted that the draft charter of the GBA don't emphasize on ritual practices, doctrinal questions, methods of ordination, etc. From a dogmatic point of view, the GBA does not manifest the will to break with the recurrent religious practices, only expressing a modest intention of modernization, in vague terms. For instance, the GBA often declared its intention to "abolish superstitions [*phế bỏ mê tín dị đoan*]", but never seemed to truly dedicate its program to that matter [TTLTQG4, TĐB 2314, 1]. This suggests that these purely religious considerations were not the main concerns that lead to the foundation of the GBA. The second charter published after the second summit of the GBA of April 1956 made little to no change to the previous one. Beside changing the headquarters of the GBA to Saigon, it mostly aimed at recognizing the special status of the northern refugees in the association. Indeed, after 1954, around 200 000 northern Buddhists chose to flee the communist DRV and would be incorporated into new sub-associations such as the *Giáo Hội Tăng Già Bắc Việt tại miền Nam* (Northern Sangha in South Vietnam) [Ibid., 2]. Original priorities of the GBA at that time appeared to be turned towards the laymen and the monastic congregation.

Table 1. Members of the Central Administrative Committee

President ( <i>Hội Chủ</i> )	Venerable Tịnh Khiết	Commissioner for education ( <i>Giáo Dục</i> )	Thầy Thiện Hòa
Vice president (Monk)	Venerable Tri Hải	Youth ( <i>Thanh niên</i> ) Commissioner	Võ Đình Cường
Vice president (Laymen)	Lê Văn Định	Finance ( <i>Tài chính</i> ) Commissioner	Lê Toại
Chairman <i>Tổng Thư Ký</i>	Tráng Đình	Art ( <i>Văn Mỹ Nghệ</i> ) Commissioner	Nguyễn Hữu Ba
Deputy Chairman	Tống Hồ Cầm	Propaganda ( <i>Cổ động</i> ) commissioner	Nguyễn Đóa
Treasurer ( <i>Chương Quỹ</i> )	Lê Mộng Tùng	Social assistance ( <i>Cứu tế Xã hội</i> )	Phạm Văn Vi
Budget control ( <i>Kiểm Lý Ngân Sách</i> )	Phan Văn Phúc	Substitute commissioner	Nguyễn Hữu Huỳnh
Commissioner for the spread of <i>Dharma</i> ( <i>Hoằng pháp</i> ) and doctrinal ( <i>Giáo Lý</i> )	Master Tri Quang		Đỗ Đình Cảnh
Commissioner for the ceremonies ( <i>Nghi-Lễ</i> )	Venerable Tổ Liên		Tôn Thất Tùng

Source: [TTLTQG4, CG 1604, 1]

### Involvement and supervision of the Buddhists laymen

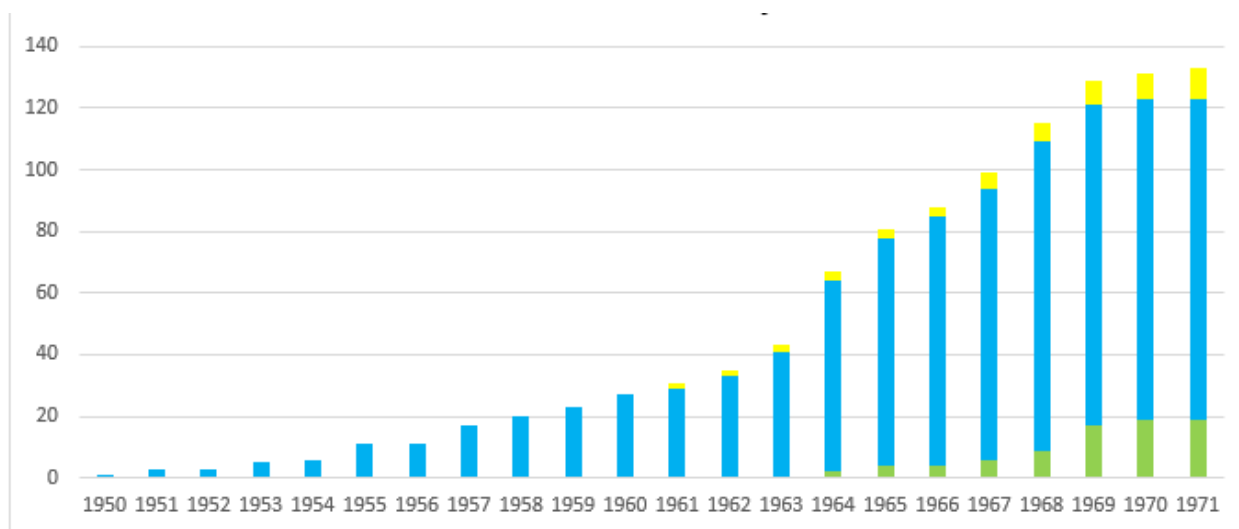
The charter emphasizes on the presence of the GBA in the public place, in touch with the society. In addition to the usual financial or purely administrative departments, new departments are dedicated to the organization of ceremonies (especially Vesak, in Vietnamese *Phật Đản*, the birthday of Buddha), but also to the supervision of youth, social services, and cultural affairs.

The Education Department (*Vụ Giáo dục*) for instance was charged to set up lay schools, called Bo De schools (*Trường Bồ Đề*). Between 1951 and 1963, 43 schools featuring the three levels of instruction had been founded. In 1961, a middle and high school had been opened in the capital city of Saigon, in the densely populated district 5 (formerly *Chợ Lớn*). This school network will be of great influence afterwards, as school and university students will play a major role during the Crisis and after it (Fig. 1).

To inform the members of the GBA about its activities, the association published a journal, the first nationwide Buddhism magazine, *Phật Giáo Việt Nam*, which had about thirty issues between 1956 and 1959, when its edition was interrupted. It also developed an innovative approach to its territorial structure, which to our knowledge is unique among the Buddhist communities of Vietnam. Under the Administrative Committee, at the level of the provincial capitals, *tỉnh hội* (provincial section) oversee all the missions, tasks, and duties of the association at the local level. At the level below, the *chi hội* (branches) provide a relay role, usually at the level of a *huyện* (district). All these components had their headquarters in pagodas. But the great strength of this association is at the level below. The *khuôn hội* (Cell<sup>6</sup>), a smaller entity, extends the GBA's reach to the village or hamlet level

<sup>6</sup> The term *khuôn hội* is difficult to translate. *Khuôn* literally means “mold”, and seems to emphasize an idea of form, of a model, to be duplicated.

and ensures that the association has a foothold in the rural world, which is thus connected to the entire national structure [Ibid., 3]. In the late 50s, early 60s, around 1300 such Khuôn-Hội had been established in Central Vietnam alone [TTLTQG2, RVN1 8512, 1].



Cumulative chart of the number of Bồ Đề schools established every year. The blue lines represent the schools of the Center, the green those of the South, the yellow represents Saigon.

**Fig. 1.** The Bo De schools system. *Source:* [Thích Thiện Hoa 1971: 29–33]

### Membership matters

To analyze the distribution of cells and members of the GBA in the field, we will use the case study of the Binh Thuan province, which is exceptionally well documented. In 1963, the *tỉnh hội* of the province capital Phan Rang had a membership of 6374 people, while the other 13 declared organizations had 548 members in total. In this city, more than 90% of Buddhists belonging to an institutionalized religious organization were members of the GBA. Outside the city however, the balance of power between the GBA and the other groups is significantly reversed. 5,500 Buddhist believers (lay people or monks) are listed, distributed among 70 pagodas or other Buddhist settlements, scattered throughout the province. The GBA had 1463 members spread over 8 *khuôn hội* and one *chi hội*, thus grouping around 20% of the rural membership. In other words, the GBA at the peak of its strength in 1963, was essentially in control in the urban area, with a decent foothold in the rural area [TTLTQG4, TĐB 2675, 1]. This urban/rural ratio was probably even more pronounced in the South. The news sections of the association’s journal *Phật Giáo Việt Nam* indicates that most of the activity in the South are in the major cities of My Tho, Ben Tre, Vinh Long and especially Can Tho. The lack of data regarding the Mekong Delta is probably indicative of a more restricted hold, related to the competition of the other organized groups mentioned above.

No clear data seems to be available to estimate the actual membership of the GBA and to describe in more detail its relationship with the laity. French ambassador Jean-Félix Charvet notes in 1959 that “The number of active registered members stood at 360,000 and that of active sympathizers at 58,500” [MFA, CLV, 150QO-47, 1]. The GBA was hence an organization with limited membership, in no way representative of the entire community, or even of the majority of the Buddhist population. Nevertheless, the testimony of prominent Sinhalese monk Narada Maha Thera, associated with the GBA, underlines the significant contribution of the association to the transformation of the Buddhist community: “Back then [mid 30s], there were no brochures about

Buddhism in Vietnam and only old people practiced the religion. Nowadays many young people practice Buddhism and strive to spread Buddha's doctrine among the masses" [Ibid.].

### **Restructuring of the Vietnamese Sangha**

We note that the place of the monks is reassessed in this new organization. The charter of the GBA places the departments under the direction of a mixed committee of lay people and monks, whom the latter clearly dominate in 1956 [TTLTQG4, TĐB 2314, 2]. The latter occupy most positions in the administrative apparatus, breaking in that matter with the colonial era's associations. This sudden and gradual rise in importance of the clerics will culminate in the time of the Buddhist crisis, when the younger ones took the lead of the movement. The organization foresees the foundation of a national Sangha (*Tăng Già Toàn Quốc*) with its initial headquarters at the Quan Su pagoda, Hanoi. In 1959, it is estimated that 1,800 monks were linked to this Sangha [MFA, Ibid.]. Particular attention is paid to their training, since the GBA will found various centers, dedicated to monks, for intensive doctrinal study, through a special program. Besides the Institute of Buddhist Studies of Vietnam of Nha Trang in 1956, acting as the main training center, the GBA opened the important centers of Phuoc Hoa in Tra Vinh, Nguyen Thieu Institute in Binh Dinh and the An Quang pagoda training classes in Saigon [Nguyễn Lang 1998: 750–768].

The An Quang complex would be one of the headquarters of the opponents during the Buddhist Crisis but was above all the first major training centers for monks in Saigon. A valuable document lists the apprentice monks and their teacher for the 1951's class. We can see they came from all regions of Vietnam to study there. Among them, Thich Thien Dinh, Thich Tinh Duc and Thich Tac Phuoc, three apprentices, would soon hold important positions within the association. Thien Dinh joined the administrative board of the Southern Sangha component in 1955 as deputy secretary, and then became its co-director at the time of the crisis, combined with two other important positions in the same board. Tinh Duc also joined the 1956–1959's board as a secretary, so did Tac Phuoc, who also held important position in the An Quang pagoda, where he was involved in the printing house of the GBA. This indicates that the training centers also served an integrative function, the young monks being easily incorporated into the administration of the GBA [TTLTQG2, PTTQG 1686, 1; Thích Không Hạnh 2016: 203, 464; TTLTQG2, RVN1 18071, 1].

### **The GBA's relationship with ruling power**

In the aftermath of the August Revolution, some of the Buddhist forces sided with the Viet Minh, thus joining the National Salvation associations (*Cứu Quốc*) that were set up. With the return of France in Vietnam, and the re-establishment of a non-Communist authority, the Buddhists seem to have sought to keep a low profile. At a time when the whole society was mobilized, amid the proliferation of new parties and other political gatherings that emerged between 1945 and 1955, the Buddhists were characterized by their absence and disengagement, despite their potential importance in the Vietnamese society. This distancing from national political life considerably isolated the GBA and undoubtedly contributes to the scarcity of documents on their activities. On the other hand, at the local level, the Buddhists connected closely with the regional governments. In the North for instance, Governor Nguyen Huu Tri (*Nguyễn Hữu Trì*) takes a direct part in the reorganization of the Sangha after the August revolution, founding a "Sangha Remodeling Association" to "attract and organize monks and nuns scattered after the tumult of the war" [TTLTQG4, CG 1242, 1]. However, the exacerbated will to stay out of mass mobilization and anti-communist effort would quickly become incompatible with Diệm's elaborated and authoritarian national project.



As a result, the GBA often had a conflicting relationship with the ruling power from its very founding until the explosion of the Buddhist crisis. For instance, the GBA had a troubled relationship with Nguyen Van Tam, fourth ruler of the state of Vietnam from June 1952 to January 1954. Tam refused to recognize the association for a long time, judging it illegitimate, infiltrated by the Communists, and authoritarian towards the other Buddhists organizations [TTLTQG4, CG 1479, 1]. He finally granted official recognition to its leaders, more than two years after the Meeting of May 1951, while expressing a certain hostility towards these same leaders [TTLTQG4, CG 1604, 3]. Facing difficulties to earn proper recognition from the government and freedom of action, the GBA complained explicitly about the legal limitations they encountered, as early as 1952, since they were under the same status as any other non-religious association (sports, artistic, etc.) [TTLTQG4, TĐB 2314, 4].

It would be wrong however to summarize the relationship between the GBA and Diem as a constant antagonism, inevitably leading to the 1963 crisis. For instance, in order to get a broader recognition of Vesak as an official holiday, the GBA had to get through bitter negotiations, the Vesak festival was granted a public holiday status in 1957, on the occasion of the 2500th anniversary of the birth of Buddha, compared to four to five public Christian holidays. But, the organization of Vesak did not seem to raise issues on the field. Complaints only emerged from May 1960 onwards, to the point that a formal letter of complaint is sent to the President by the GBA itself [TTLTQG4, TĐB 2413, 1]. These complaints would become more and more recurrent until the crisis.

It should be noted, however, that Diem's government had a special relationship with the GBA compared to the rest of the Buddhist community. The successive headquarters of the GBA, first the Phuoc Hoa Pagoda, then the Xa Loi Pagoda from 1956 onward, were the sites for the celebration of major official ceremonies, in the same manner as the Duc Ba Cathedral for the Catholic community [TTLTQG2, RVN1 17906, 1]. Diem did not seek to offer this “place” to any other Buddhist association, effectively acknowledging a different kind of legitimacy for the association. In 1962, for practical reasons, the GBA made a request to change the official date of Vesak's celebrations. This request was accepted by the presidency, which thus changed the date of a religious holiday, presumably without prior and thorough discussions with the many other Buddhist organizations. While the relationship with Ngo Dinh Diem's administration and with the president himself was not always smooth or profound prior to 1963, it is worth noting that the GBA occupied this special place among the other Buddhist communities [TTLTQG2, PTT 29570, 1].

### Conclusion

The major failure of the GBA lied in its inability to federate efficiently its different components. At first, it should be noted that after 1954, the GBA was of course only representative of the Southern half of the previous SVN. Furthermore, the existence of a general association didn't lead to the merging of the previous associations into a single one. Soon, the leaders of the GBA abandoned that objective. This postponement is clearly stated in the letter to the President sent by the association to introduce the second national summit of 1956: “The GBA was founded with the will to unify Vietnamese Buddhist, belonging to the Mahayana sect, which is the traditional sect of the country, with a long and glorious history of more than a thousand years. But because the situation has not yet allowed to erase [*xoá bỏ*] the existing groups of monks and laymen and to establish a single Association, the Vietnam Buddhist Association has to operate temporarily as of a General Association” [TTLTQG4, TĐB 2314, 5]. In the first years of the association's existence, the French administration explained these difficulties by the persistence of “particularism[s]” and personal

interests, as well as the desire to preserve a certain autonomy: “If the Buddhists recognize the need for a union, their particularism is opposed to it, and the interests of the Buddhist clergy, which benefits from the current anarchy, each pagoda having all of its own income for its own clergy and not having to account for it to any higher authority” [Haut-Commissariat En Indochine 1952].

Beside this lack of unity, the organization is also heavily shaped by the influence of the Central community: the official symbol of the GBA, the structure in Tỉnh, Chi and Khuôn Hội, the choice of Huế as the meeting place in 1951 and first headquarters of the GBA, the repartition of the delegates and influential posts among the association, all these elements reveal the importance of the Central community in this project of association. With the partition of the country in 1954, the Northern community was reduced to only 200,000 refugees, officially incorporated in the GBA in 1956. Therefore, the influence of the Central community increased further to the expense of a greater inclusion of the South: Charvet notes in 1958 “[...] reformed Buddhism has in South Vietnam [RVN] 2,000,000 followers in the former Annam [Central Vietnam] and 100,000 in the former Cochinchina”. [MFA, *ibid.*] The graph depicting the Bờ-Đề school system above is another proof of this late inclusion of the South in the national project of the GBA. The first schools were only built, in limited numbers, after 1964, while the number of schools doubled in the next decade.

The Northerner refugees’ integration was difficult, and they would become a dissenting force after 1963, quickly adopting a pro-government stance, while the rest of the UBC remained fiercely opposed to all the authorities at the head of the RVN. Furthermore, some of the most important actors within the local associations of the South were in fact linked to the training networks of Central Vietnam. Southern born Thich Thien Hoa and Thích Thiện Hoa, among the most influential and actives monks from the South within the GBA, involved in the Buddhist crisis, were trained in Central Vietnam before 1945 [Thích Đồng Bôn 1995: 164–167, 196–199]. The 1951’s class hosted in An Quang was supervised by Thien Hoa and 8 other monks, seven natives from Central Vietnam, one from Northern Vietnam [TTLTQG2, PTTQG 1686, *ibid.*].

Finally, the shutdown of the national magazine *Phật Giáo Việt Nam* in 1959, and the persistence of regional magazine (*Từ Quang* in the South, *Viên Âm* and *Liên Hoa* in Central Vietnam) shows how the GBA failed to generate a profuse interest among the Vietnamese Buddhists and the inability of this association to effectively embody a national movement, to make the Buddhists of the country speak with one voice. This last detail is another harbinger of the challenges UBC would face in the following decade.

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## ACADEMIC EVENTS

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### OVERVIEW OF THE ORGANIZATION OF VIETNAMESE STUDIES IN THOSE INSTITUTIONS WHERE YOUNG RESEARCHERS PREPARE THEIR DISSERTATIONS AND THESE ARTICLES

**Benoît de Tréglodé**

**Antoine Lê** is conducting his PhD at the INALCO (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales). The National University of Languages and Oriental Civilizations is a public university that was founded in 1795. Dr. Jean-Philippe Eglinger is teaching at INALCO, a university where he also defended his PhD. Ever since, it has been amongst the main academic institutions in France to teach dozens of different languages and cultural studies classes. Amongst its 14 research teams, the INALCO has two units that include Vietnamese studies in their capacities – the French Research Institute on East Asia (IFRAE) and the Center for South East Asian Studies (CASE), which is a joint EHESS-CNRS-INALCO research unit. For a scholar in Vietnamese history, being affiliated with these major academic institutions offers priceless opportunities to access important archive centers in France. The first one is the French Diplomatic Archives Center at La Courneuve that curates all the archives of the French Foreign Ministry, while the Diplomatic Archives Center in Nantes holds the fonds from the various French diplomatic missions and embassies around the world. Since 2002, facilitating greatly the researcher's work, the Center at La Courneuve has recategorized thousands of unique documents from the French diplomatic and intelligence services about all aspects of the Vietnam War under a single archives' series (148QO Vietnam-Conflit). Another major place of interest for Vietnam scholars is the archive at the Institut d'Asie Orientale (IAO) in Lyon. Consisting of thousands of unique documents originating from scholars Georges Boudarel and Daniel Hemery's private archives, it has been continuously augmented by Francois Guillemot through the acquisition of hundreds of Vietnamese language publications, that are difficult or near-impossible to find elsewhere.

**Dr. Thi Thanh Phuong Nguyen-Pochan** has defended her PhD at the University of Paris 8 (Vincennes – Saint-Denis). In 2002, the university's geopolitical research laboratory has become the French Institute of Geopolitics (IFG). Its scientific journal *Hérodote* (Journal of geography and geopolitics), founded in 1976, is the oldest journal in this field and is dedicated to research on contemporary geopolitical issues around the world. *Hérodote* has recently released two dossiers on the Southeast Asian region and Vietnam: Issue No. 176 (2002) on Southeast Asia, and issue No. 157 (2015) on geopolitical issues at stake in contemporary Vietnam. Since 2021, Thi Thanh Phuong Nguyen-Pochan holds a tenure track position at the Catholic University of the West (UCO), the only private university in France to hold a research chair dedicated to Vietnam. Its aim is to establish and

develop sustainable academic relations between the UCO and its Vietnamese peers, and to become a powerful network for the exchange of knowledge, expertise and soft skills between France and Vietnam.

**Dr. Johann Grémont** defended his PhD at the University of Paris, this university (previously called University Paris 7 - Diderot) covers a wide range of disciplines. The fields of human, economic and social sciences offer opportunities to train through researches about colonial studies especially French colonial Indochina. Alain Forest, Pierre Brocheux, Daniel Hémerly or Emmanuel Poisson have directed many theses on this subject. Dr. Grémont is now affiliated to the French Research Institute on East Asia (IFRAE/UMR8043), a team affiliated with the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Cultures (INALCO), the University of Paris, and the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). It was founded on January 1, 2019. IFRAE gathers specialists studying a vast geographic area. It includes Japan, China, South Korea, North Korea, Mongolia, Nepal, Taiwan, Tibet and Vietnam. The institute was created by the merger of two laboratories: ASIEs & the Centre for Japanese studies (CEJ), both part of INALCO, joined by several lecturers and researchers from the University of Paris. It is one of the major research centers on East Asia in Europe.

**Marion Reinos** is a PhD researcher affiliated to the Architecture School of Toulouse – Research Laboratory in Architecture (LRA), an active research laboratory focusing on architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning, promoting cross-disciplinary approaches and combining social and technical sciences. Part of the Architecture School of Toulouse, the LRA, has a long-lasting relationship with Vietnam and the Hanoi Architectural University, with several joint educational programmes (delocalised Licence-Master-Doctorat program; post-graduate diploma in heritage and sustainable development). The laboratory has already delivered several PhDs focusing on urban and architectural transformation in the Vietnamese context and engaged in various French-Vietnamese research initiatives. The CESSMA-IRD, part of the University of Paris, is a joint research unit created to analyse the historical and spatial configurations of the dynamics of development and globalisation in the Global South. In Vietnam, this multidisciplinary institute explores various research topics on emerging issues related to rapid development, climate change and resources management, and has built strong partnerships with local universities. This entity has developed diverse research activities and capacity building initiatives such as “Les Journées de Tam Dao”, the “Young Research Team associated with the IRD” (JEAI) programme and the creation of joint research units (LMI, UMI), among other scientific vulgarisation activities.

**Clara Jullien** is conducting her PhD research at the University of Paris (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne). She’s also an associate member of the Géographie-Cités research lab which focuses on urban planning and mobilities in France and internationally, including Eastern Asia. Her PhD research is conducted in collaboration with the Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Vietnam National University. Clara Jullien is currently hosted in Ho Chi Minh City by the EFEO (Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient), which supported this work. The EFEO is an interdisciplinary institution presented all across Asia, that develops research in humanities and social sciences on Asian civilizations, promotes fieldwork and maintains a vast documentary collection. Moreover, she is associated to and sponsored by the IRASEC (Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia), a French research center in social sciences and humanities on South-East Asia, based in Bangkok, Thailand, which focuses on political, social, economic and environmental processes, as well as regional integration dynamics. In addition, outside the scope of

Vietnamese Studies, Clara Jullien benefited from the strong support of the Palladio Foundation dedicated to the challenges of urban development, and the Académie Française.

**Sunny Le Galloudec** is a PhD candidate at the University of Le Havre – Normandie, a recent and small but worth mentioning and promising pole for Vietnamese Studies as well as Colonial and Post-Colonial Studies. As a former colonial metropolitan port of the French Empire, Le Havre is also a perfect place for any scholars that might pursue research in Maritime and Port History in a colonial and/or post-colonial approach, as well as in Global History. Many interesting archives material can be found there, including the archives of the Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes, stored at the EPCC French Lines & Companies. In terms of research, Jean-François Klein, now Professor at the University of Bretagne-Sud, recently started a new Vietnamese studies dynamic there, by supervising two PhD candidates: Édouard de Saint-Ours starting from 2018 (his thesis explores the place of photography within the French colonial enterprise in continental Southeast Asia in the 19th century), and Sunny Le Galloudec one year later; both attached to the UMR CNRS IDEES 6266 – Le Havre, a multidisciplinary laboratory where academics, researchers and PhD students are also working on maritime and port topics. Another proof of this new dynamic is the forthcoming international conference “From the Port to the World. A Global History of Indochinese Ports (1858–1956)”, to be held in Da Nang (Vietnam), on October 27–28, 2022. Initiated and coordinated by Sunny Le Galloudec, this international event will indeed be co-funded, amongst others, by the University of Le Havre and the UMR CNRS IDEES 6266.

**Camille Senepin** is conducting her PhD research at the EHESS, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales [School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences], a research institution based in Paris. This school, born in 1947, is specialized in social and human science. It has 252 full time faculty members and hosts many disciplines such as anthropology, history, sociology, or political sciences. Many French researchers working about Vietnam were PhD students at the EHESS or are university lecturers in the institution. Vietnam and its research issues are discussed in several seminars of the Parisian school, such as “comparative Anthropology of Southeast Asia”, “dialogues between classical and current research on Southeast Asia” or “anthropology of authority”. The researchers conducting the seminars are part of the CASE, Centre Asie du Sud-Est [Center for Southeast Asian Studies], which is a research center dedicated to Southeast Asian Studies. Vietnamese studies are an important part of the life of the CASE and the EHESS, as shown by the large number of researchers working in Vietnam connected to these institutions, such as Annick Guénel, Andrew Hardy, Jérémy Jammes, Anne-Valérie Schweyer, Paul Sorrentino or Benoît de Tréglodé. In 2021, five PhD students researching Vietnam are linked to the EHESS or the CASE.

**Guilhem Cousin-Thorez** is a PhD candidate at IrAsia in Aix-en-Provence, a research institute created in 2012, when two previous research departments merged to form a single research center, focusing on Asian cultural areas from Southeast Asia to the Far East area. IrAsia’s researchers are specialized on every main humanity and social sciences disciplines. Its headquarters are located at the University of Aix-Marseille, southern France, within the Maison Asie Pacifique. The MAP owns a large library, included in the DocAsie network, which gathers all the main Asian-oriented documentations centers of France. IrAsia publishes three periodicals, notably Moussons since 1999, a bilingual periodical, free access, available both in physical form and online on Openedition. IrAsia participates in a particular research process on the colonial period due to its collaboration and its proximity with the ANOM center (Overseas National Archives). This center features a significant

part of the colonial archives of the former French empire. Extensive sets of primary sources from the Vietnam colony and protectorates are available there, dating from the second half of the 19th century to the end of the Indochina War. The considerable diversity of these archives makes it an important documentation center for any research on the colonial period, as a valuable complement to the sources available either in Paris or in Vietnam. The ANOM also has a library which includes numerous publications from the colonial era, in addition to recent scientific works and reviews.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FRANCE AND VIETNAM

### Overview of a scientific conference in France on Vietnam, Southeast Asia

In February 27, 2020, the University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 (UPVM3) organized an International symposium with the France – Vietnam friendship groups of the National Assembly and the French Senate on three issues: South China Sea: Challenges and opportunities for France and Vietnam, littoral states and Indo-Pacific powers. This conference was opened with an inventory of Franco-Vietnamese relations through the testimonies of Stéphanie Do (Deputy Seine-et-Marne and President of the France – Vietnam Friendship Group at the National Assembly). The first two round tables enabled a legal and strategic analysis of regional and international tensions triggered by territorial claims and the various activities of the parties related to the conflict in the South China Sea. The second panel focused on strategic issues in Southeast Asia. The following two round tables aimed to broaden the chronology over a wide period and above all to focus on the Soft Power aspects which were until then less subjects of study. In so doing, they have contributed to a renewal of the approach to the conflicts in the South China Sea and to a broadening of these issues. Finally, the last round table dealt with economic, cultural and environmental aspects linked to the South China Sea riparian states. If we look at the French university developing activities and researches on Vietnam, we should mention the emergence in recent years of a dynamic pole at the University of Montpellier 3 (UPVM3) around Prof. Pierre Journoud. In 2006, the UPVM3 and the University of Languages and International Studies in Hanoi officially established their cooperation, which gave birth to a wide range of activities in Vietnam and in France. In 2019, Prof. Pierre Journoud and Nguyen Thanh Hoa created a new diploma on Vietnamese studies named D.U. “Tremplin pour le Vietnam” (A Jump to Vietnam). With the efficient help of about twenty lecturers from Vietnam and France, having fully committed to fruitful cooperation between both countries, this diploma is now able to cover a large range of areas: arts, communication, economy, environment, geopolitics, history, literature, society, etc. Finally, Pierre Journoud also launched in late 2018 a new interdisciplinary research program called PAGOPI, together with French professors of medicine and anthropology, and a few Vietnamese colleagues. It dealt with uses and consequences of pesticides / dioxin in Southeast Asia: firstly, the Agent orange in South Vietnam and Cambodia during the chemical warfare in the sixties (especially the transgenerational effects), and secondly the use of pesticides today in Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand.

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Scientific institutions researching Vietnam on the map of France

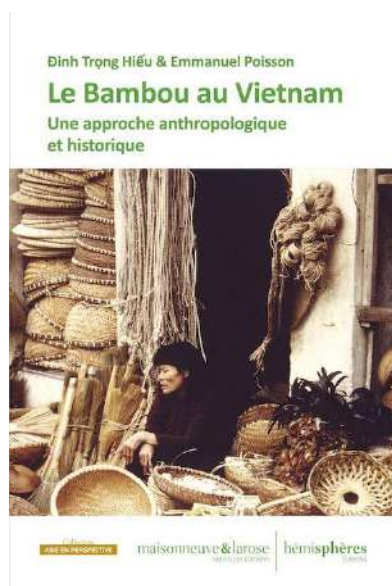
## BOOKSHELF

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### EVERYTHING ON BAMBOO

Frédéric Thomas

**Đinh Trọng Hiếu & Emmanuel Poisson. Le bambou au Vietnam. Une approche anthropologique et historique [Bamboo in Vietnam. An Anthropological and Historical Approach]. Maisonneuve & Larose, 2020. 287 p. ISBN: 2377010644**



**Abstract.** The review is given for the book “Bamboo in Vietnam. An Anthropological and Historical Approach” by Đinh Trọng Hiếu and Emmanuel Poisson. The book is richly illustrated with old engravings and lithographs. It is a kind of encyclopedia that describes in detail the whole range of uses of bamboo in the life of the Vietnamese.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, bamboo, anthropology, history, tools, musical instruments, craftsman.

Đinh Trọng Hiếu and Emmanuel Poisson have written a beautiful book on the anthropology and history of bamboo in Vietnam. It contains 160 engravings relating to the uses of bamboo, taken from Henri Oger's book *Technique du peuple Annamite* (Paris, Geuthner, 1909) and 12 exceptional lithographs from the Gia Định School of Art from the 1930s; secondly, because the authors bring together their skills as anthropologist and ethnobotanist, in the case of the former, and historian, in the case of the latter, to show the importance of bamboo in the material culture of Vietnam and thus in its history. The eclecticism of the sources, from imperial chronicles (the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* in particular), to direct descriptions of bamboo tools, via family oral transmissions (a recipe for tương from Hiếu's mother), finally contributes to the originality of the work.

The first part of the book is organised into 5 chapters. After an introductory chapter presenting the different species and varieties of bamboo, their multiple uses, their omnipresence in Vietnamese landscapes and the antiquity of their use – the first archaeological traces of bamboo use by the men of the region go back to the Hoabinian period (9000 years B.C.) –, chapter 2 dwells at length on the terminology allowing to describe the different species and varieties of bamboo, the different parts of the plant as well as the vocabulary associated with the different uses of

bamboo. Each type of use requires the craftsman to choose one variety rather than another, one part of the fibre (internal or external), etc. For example, old people will prefer *Bambusa ventricosa* (trúc ãi gà) with a number of internodes multiple of twelve to make their old-age stick; and for the manufacture of paddles, old, flexible bamboo will be necessary: “The first quality of a paddle is to be flexible, it is this flexibility that makes the movement of the paddle follow the rhythm of walking while imparting a momentum. Only the base part of an old bamboo, which is hardly more than two metres long, is suitable for making this instrument” (p. 35). By multiplying these examples, the authors show how the development of an extremely diversified and ingenious craft based on bamboo has developed an in-depth knowledge of the plant, its physiology and its morphology.

Chapter 3 is a systematic description of the different uses of bamboo, starting with the uses of live bamboo (defensive hedges, typhoon and flood hedges). We learn that bamboo hedges protecting villages in the past were planted on small embankments so that the rhizomes did not spread, thus concentrating the shoots in one place and making the hedge impenetrable very quickly. The uses of bamboo simply cut in the form of a trunk or hollowed out tube are innumerable (rafts, gourds, norias, piping, framing...). To make *còm lam* (glutinous rice cooked in a bamboo tube), use *Dendrocalamus*, a bamboo with a not too thick culm wall, perfect for cooking (p. 57), and for your knife handles the small yellow bamboos called trúc ãi gà are preferable as they are solid and foolproof. The bamboo musical instruments are as varied as they are amazing, the Sédangs' hydraulic carillon in particular, of which the authors give a very nice description (p. 65–67), accompanied by an in situ photograph dating from 1977 by Jean-Dominique Lajoux.

Chapter 4 analyses the values and symbols attached to bamboo. Bamboo can be synonymous with righteousness, the image of a good man, but it is also synonymous with greed. The ambivalence of this symbolism is due, according to the authors, to the fact that bamboo is both a noble and a trivial material.

The last chapter of the first part focuses on the theme of “bamboo and power”, i.e. essentially on the political uses of bamboo. The authors approach this theme through three entries: imperial rituals, imperial bureaucracy and military uses. They show how bamboo, both standing and cut, is an essential material of power. The construction, protection and maintenance of dykes, for example, were directly dependent on bamboo; the imperial post (Trạm) with its ordinances, its riders, its relays and the innumerable decrees describing the techniques of sealing on bamboo to guarantee imperial secrets would not have been the same without the bamboo tube, not to mention the innumerable battles, maritime or land, won by the Vietnamese armies at all times thanks to the deadly and humiliating power of the bamboo stakes, bamboo cangue, bamboo cage... The authors finally show that bamboo is not only part of the daily life of the Vietnamese as a building material and a central component of countless everyday techniques, but also in the very existence of politics and the state.

Readers will enjoy the second part like a book of curiosities. Entirely devoted to the reproduction and presentation of woodcuts from Henri Oger's book and lithographs from the Gia Định School of Art, as has been said, one learns how to cut, split and shape bamboo, how to ride an escarpolette on village feast days, how to build drains, how to castrate a dog by enclosing it in bamboo mats (not recommended), how to scoop out a rice field or dry rice cakes on bamboo racks... What stands out from the multiplicity of these uses and the diversity of tools and utensils made of bamboo is, of course, the immense modularity of the material. Indeed, is there any other

material capable of such modularity? The authors answer plastic, only plastic can indeed claim to beat bamboo in terms of the diversity of its uses. This is a profound and meaningful remark, as one could not better describe the place of bamboo in the history of Vietnam: it is precisely because the people of these lands benefited from such a modular material very early in their history that they were able to mobilise this material to live, grow and develop, both in everyday life and at critical moments in the country's history.

This observation is reminiscent of the view that the geographer Pierre Gourou, quoted by the authors, had of Vietnam and its neighbours as “plant civilisations”. Gourou thus sought to synthesise a certain number of important contributions of French human geography of the time to explain the relationship between man and the environment. Heir to Vidal de la Blache, Gourou was a master in the mobilisation of the concepts of “genre de vie”, “possibilism”, “techniques of production”, “techniques of management” and “landscape efficiency” to explain these civilisational facts that link humans to their living environment and that require us to go beyond the frontier between nature and culture in order to understand them in their essence. Long criticised for its political conservatism, based on the anchoring of humans in their environment, this way of giving the environment a predominant place in the understanding of human history is now being revived under the name of environmental history. Without explicitly claiming to be one, the present work, by making bamboo a key element of Vietnamese plant landscapes and of the history of this region, moves in this direction. It goes beyond a classical anthropology of Vietnamese material culture and suggests in its own way to revisit the history of Vietnam through the prism of an environmental history that gives its full place to the plants, animals, ecosystems and climates that have made the history of this country as much as the people.

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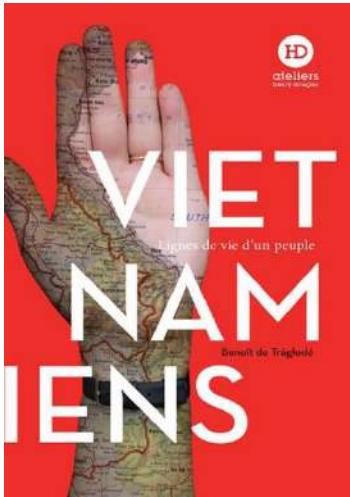
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## NEW VIETNAM THROUGH THE EYES OF ITS PEOPLE

Jérémy Jammes



**Benoît de Tréglodé. Vietnamiens. Lignes de vie d'un peuple [Vietnamese. Lifelines of a People]. Paris: Ateliers Henri-Dougier, 2021. 154 p. ISBN-13: 979-1031202426**

**Abstract.** The review is given for the book “Vietnamese. Lifelines of a People” by Benoît de Tréglodé. 26 interviews with Vietnamese men and women of different ages and places of residence, professions and social status create a portrait of the Vietnamese people, a picture of their current life, character, beliefs and culture.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, the Vietnamese, autobiographical portraits, history, Vietnam War, traditional culture, Đổi mới policy.

Benoît de Tréglodé’s “Vietnamiens. Lignes de vie d’un peuple (Vietnamese. Lifelines of a people)” is a part of a series published by Ateliers Henri-Dougier, “Lignes de vie d’un peuple (Lifelines of a people)”. Briefly, this collection focuses on a ‘people’ who are part of a nation (Cambodians, Mexicans, etc.) or who have a clear sense of identity (the Scots, French-speaking Canadians, etc.). A journalist or researcher is then invited to share his or her encounters and conversations with selected members of this particular people. Each book aims to “showcase the vitality and inventiveness of a people, highlighting what is singular and universal, familiar and strange about them”. Accordingly, this book does not pretend to be targeted at a specialist audience, but rather is oriented towards the general public.

In the case of Vietnamiens, it contains a series of autobiographical portraits: twenty-six Vietnamese men and women of all ages, ranging from urban to rural, from lowlanders to highlanders, from atheistic to Buddhist or Catholic, from various social positions, from close to far away from political power. These narratives were compiled from interviews, which are intended to reveal the little and big stories that constitute the plural density of the people and of Vietnam’s contemporary history. The collector of these interviews, historian Benoît de Tréglodé, is currently director of research and head of the Africa – Asia – Middle East domain at the Strategic Research Institute of the École Militaire (IRSEM). The author is therefore well placed to identify “the Vietnamese” who best embody the spirit of the times and the ongoing changes in Vietnamese society. The resulting book is a 154-page, non-jargon style book that flows smoothly. The table of contents includes a letter of intent from the author, a historical introduction, six thematic chapters and a series of appendices (key figures and dates for the country, a short list of Vietnamese authors, artists and intellectuals, and few references). It is divided into the following chapters: “A heterogeneous territory shaped by history”, “War and Peace”, “A new relationship with the world”, “Traditional culture and creativity”, “Pleasures and everyday life”, and “Exile and nostalgia for the country”. Each chapter consists of the

transcription of 4 or 5 interviews, which respond, in a brief and personal way, to questions on the life trajectory of the interviewees (deputy, nurse, Catholic father, singer, filmmaker, seamstress, LGBT activist, former member of the intelligence service, researchers, etc.), living in the North, the Centre, the South of the country or living in exile.

This patchwork of narratives enables the reader to look beyond the commonplace, to abandon the nostalgic discourse of the Indochinese colonial era but rather to meditate on the evolution of a country and its citizens following the Vietnam War. Focusing on the smallest units of the Vietnamese people, the individual, the citizen, subsequently leads to more general, even fundamental questions, such as: “Are we now writing about the war in Vietnam in the same way we wrote about it in the 1960s and 1970s?” (p. 47), “What are young Vietnamese writers writing about?” (p. 49), “How has Vietnamese identity been altered by all these geopolitical changes engendered by *Đổi mới*?” (p. 68), “Are arranged marriages still numerous?” (p. 81), “Can we make a film of everything in Vietnam today?” (p. 113), “To what extent is Vietnam’s policy of economic openness a success? In your opinion, what are the limits of this opening up?” (p. 134), etc.

These contemporary narratives are captured in the manner of photographic snapshots, accepting both the limit and the strength, the uniqueness and the potential for generalization, of these narratives. To use the photographic metaphor, it is noteworthy that French colonization and the Vietnam War constitute rarely the historical ‘backdrop’ of the main ‘photographed’ (interviewed) subject. This historical horizon seems to be very distant in the concerns of the interviewees. On the other hand, three periods return regularly in the words of the interviewees as referring moments in their lives: the time right after independence (1975), the so-called “subsidy period”, characterized by a peace gained at the price of human losses, economic restrictions, and sacrifices; the *Đổi mới* policy (1986), “to change in order to make something new”, a sort of Vietnamese-style perestroika which series of reforms would eventually bring hope and lift the frenetic spirit of the population and of the market, impacting political, economic, and social decisions at varying degrees of the society; the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent necessity to rethink the country’s international postures, leading directly to the end of the American embargo in 1994, to the country’s admission as a member of ASEAN in 1995, to the opening up of its tourism sector, to its registration with the OECD, etc.

The various encounters selected by the author are by no means representative of the entire population, but invite the targeted reader – the well-informed tourist, the entrepreneur, the journalist, the diplomat – to revisit the monopolistic discourse offered by the Communist Party, which provides “a simplified mirror, [...] an ideal interpretation of history transformed into a unifying narrative [as well as] a moral vision of the country’s future” (p. 10). To go even further in this critical and de-centred approach regarding the official discourse, it would be desirable to repeat this type of collection and transcription of life stories of “Vietnamese citizens” who are often relegated to the margins of society (“ethnic minorities” Cham, Hmong, Jarai, Khmer Krom, Tay, etc.; “religious minorities” like Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Cao Đài religion, Protestant Evangelical Protestantism and others) who do not appear in this volume although their active contribution to the history of Vietnam, as well as to the ethnic and ideological diversity of the country.

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**Benoît de Tréglodé**

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