

Viện Việt-Học
Institute of Vietnamese Studies

Vietnam Culture Series

No. 3

**INTO THE MAELSTROM:
VIETNAM DURING THE FATEFUL 1940S**

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Ban Tu-Thư Việt-Học
Viet-Hoc Publishing Department
VII-2005

Library of Congress Control Number: 2005931401

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ISBN: 978-0-9764994-1-1

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Printed in the United States of America.

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FRENCH COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION AND VIETNAMESE MONARCHY BETWEEN 1930 AND 1940

Punctuated with the mutiny of the Yên Bái garrison instigated by the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng party, which was supposed to trigger a general uprising in Tonkin, and with workers' strikes and peasants' demonstrations in Cochinchina and the constitution of rural soviets in northern Annam, all spurred on by the new Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), the revolutionary crisis of 1930-31 seemed like a downright challenge to the colonial order. Only a very harsh repression had enabled the authorities to overcome this outburst of violence that revealed in the most striking manner the general rejection of French domination.

Once the alarm was over, the events were assessed. In his analysis of the brand-new revolutionary phenomenon, the governor general of Indochina picked out three factors – 1) the existence in northern Annam of a hard to contain nationalist current, activated by the Communists, 2) the unbalance of the native social conditions, the real cause of which was rural poverty peculiar to Asiatic communities, and 3) the great ease with which the bolshevisation of the credulous materialistic peasantry could have been effected – to wonder whether the joint intervention of the French colonial power and the Vietnamese royal government might not, through a series of well conducted reforms, extinguish the virulence of nationalism, balance the social situation by eradicating poverty, and restore the confidence of the population in the legal authorities.¹ This undertaking of reconstruction, apparently, should first go through a

¹ Nguyễn Thế Anh, "The Vietnamese Monarchy under French Colonial Rule, 1884-1945", *Modern Asian Studies*, 19, 1 (1985), p. 158.

restructuring of the traditional mandarin framework, the shortcomings of which were of a common accord emphasized by the heads of the colonial administration. Indeed, in every area where the ICP had been established, the mandarin substructures had either crumbled or lapsed into inertia, whereas the communist activists concentrated their offensive against the rich, the notables, the royal government and the French: this allowed them to lead a struggle both national and social, by encompassing in a single target all the upholders of the colonial system. Faced with the disquieting troubles in Nghệ Tĩnh, *résident supérieur* Le Fol deemed it necessary that the *Cơ Mật* (the council of the ministers of the royal government) designated a delegate in charge of representing it at Vinh, while he himself dispatched an Inspector of Political Affairs to take the necessary decisions in his name.² On diverse occasions, the *résident supérieur* and the minister of Justice, Tôn-thất Đản, had gone on the spot to try to calm things down, while summoning the local mandarins to speak to them very firmly.³ At the *résident supérieur*'s request, the *Cơ Mật* had royal edicts and decrees put up, specifying that notables that had been declared responsible of the damages caused in their jurisdictions would henceforth find themselves bound to answer for those materially and personally. The village community itself was considered as guarantor of the order within the commune, and enjoined to no longer follow the communist agitators, so not to be subjected to penalties ranging from collective taxation to the destruction of the village.⁴ Land owners and literati were also invited to play again their traditional role vis-à-vis the masses, since they constituted the armature of the society, armature to this day so helpless and passive in the face of the communists. Retired mandarins from Hà Tĩnh were sent back to the villages where their families were living to lead counter-propaganda. Lastly, an administrative commission directed by the president of the Hanoi Court of Appeal, Morché, was appointed to investigate the action of the *tổng đốc* (provincial governors) during the troubles and the dynamism displayed by them in the repression. At the same time, the *Cơ Mật* was called on for its part to examine complaints and petitions in order to know the names of the mandarins particularly exposed to public condemnation.⁵

Meanwhile, the events had demonstrated the deficiencies of the native political and social structures, auxiliaries of the French administrative machinery, and of the dangerous void that existed at the top of the "indigenous city", which threw back into question the assimilating administration of some former governors general. The authorities of the Protectorate realized in particular that the convention of 6 November 1925, established for the period of Emperor Bảo Đại's minority and constituting an act of the highest importance in the process of the assimilation of Annam, whose political status came by this very fact closer to that of Tonkin,⁶ had driven them back to a political dead end: by depriving the Vietnamese sovereign of every power save his

² Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 368/2939.

³ Cf. Patrice Morlat, *La répression coloniale au Vietnam (1908-1940)*. Paris, L'Harmattan, 1990, p. 174.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁶ This convention stated that rituals and constitutional rules remained in the domain of the royal edicts and that the Emperor would go on assuming his sacred role and his right of reprieve. But all matters concerning justice and administration would be governed by the decrees of the head of the Protectorate. For certain affairs however, the latter would have to consult the *Cơ Mật*, or to obtain the adherence of the Chamber of the Representatives of the People of Annam, the creation of which had been decided by the convention. See, for a detailed commentary, Paul Couzinet, "La structure juridique de l'Union Indochinoise", *La Revue indochinoise juridique et économique*, 1938-VII, p. 465 sq.; Nguyễn Thế Anh, *Monarchie et fait colonial au Việt-Nam (1875-1925). Le crépuscule d'un ordre traditionnel*. Paris, L'Harmattan, 1992, pp. 271-274.

religious functions, they had been in consequence obliged to assume the responsibility of repressing all the expressions of popular discontent, including those following economical causes, as had been the case in Nghệ Tĩnh. Anyway, they were henceforth convinced that communism, perceived by them as a new expression of radical nationalism, should be fought against not only through implacable repression, but also through political measures, by trying to deprive it of its potential allies among the upper classes of the Vietnamese society and to reinforce the alliance between those classes and the colonial administration by means of limited concessions. Thence the necessity of reactivating the protectorate in Việt-Nam and consolidating the monarchical regime through transformations that would regenerate the administrative framework, as formulated by the chorus of demands for reform assailing the Minister of Colonies Paul Reynaud during his tour of inspection in Indochina in autumn 1931, demands the most eloquent of which were voiced by Phạm Quỳnh who focused in a series of articles (the first of them was entitled “Vers une Constitution”⁷) on the restoration of the powers of the emperor of Annam and the necessity of giving the Vietnamese a stronger national identity under the French protectorate. For their part, the spokesmen of the Chamber of the Representatives of the People of Tonkin called for an extension of their competences in their wish-book drawn up together with the elected representatives of Cochinchina.⁸

The administrators of the Protectorate were therefore concerned with revitalizing the conservative components of tradition in order to divert public opinion from revolutionary propaganda. “Preserve the garden intact as we have found it” and “Safeguard the past for the benefit of the future”, those were the key words of Pierre Pasquier, Indochina’s governor general.⁹ To make the royal government, with the return in Annam of the young emperor Bảo Đại who had been sent to study in France since 1922,¹⁰ a live institution whose initiative of decisions

⁷ Those articles, which appeared first in the journal *France Indochine*, were collected together in the last part (“Nationalism annamite et Protectorat français”) of the *Essais franco-annamites* that Phạm Quỳnh had published in 1937.

⁸ Nevertheless, the reforms the Minister of Colonies was willing to concede had only to do with a reduction in the rice export tax, an extension of long-term agricultural credit agreements, an abrogation of imprisonment for debt, and improvements in the mandarinat. At the end of his visit, he declared that in his opinion it would be dangerous to grant too much autonomy to a population which had no middle class, but only an immense mass of illiterate peasants under a thin layer of educated people.

⁹ Pierre Pasquier, moreover, had always considered the ancient order and the traditional forces of the Vietnamese country as useful barriers against revolutionary nationalism. Since his appointment as résident supérieur in Annam, he had already defended a policy of association the main lines of which he outlined in a note dated 17 October 1921 and entitled “Of a policy to put into practice at Huê” (reproduced in: *Gouvernement Général de l’Indochine. Direction des Affaires Politiques, Continuité de la politique française du protectorat en Annam-Tonkin avant et après l’avènement de Sa Majesté Bao-Dai.*) In that note these lines could be read: “A king whose sincere feelings we know, of whose collaboration we can be assured, a king therefore not questioned by the French and whose prestige is solidly established can be a useful adjuvant for our action, he can, by us, assure the peace of the minds and contain the movements that could occur on the right as well as on the left. King Khải Định is able to play this role with our help, he can ‘maintain’ while we, we ‘will act’. To carry through such a policy, we need only frankness and uprightness in our relations with the king and the Annamese government.”

¹⁰ Born on 21 October 1913, Bảo Đại would be in 1931 eighteen years old, “age from whence the Annamese must pay taxes and are consequently considered as having come of age”, as Nguyễn Hữu Bài, the Minister of the Civil Service (*Bộ Lại*, which the French texts then called Ministry of Interior), reminded at the session of the *Cơ Mật* on 24 October 1930; during the same council of government, Nguyễn Hữu Bài

and reforms would give satisfaction to the aspirations of the Vietnamese nation, there was the cornerstone of the political programme that Pasquier exposed in his report on 14 April 1931 to the Minister of Colonies:

“The modern adaptation of Annam’s intern sovereignty to the 1884 treaty should be the goal of the political reorganization of the two countries. Its continuation implies a renovation of the native administrative system: a revivification of the mandarins’ power in certain domains where we had had to substitute ourselves for it. That is to say that France will once again achieve the nobleness of her intentions and the broadness of her ideas. She will restore instead of weakening, and she will restore in the direction of the Annamese national tradition. After so long a dynastic past, the country of Annam cannot cease to be a kingdom. The head of the State, even in the eyes of modernized Annamese, must remain the privileged being that perpetuates the ancestral cult, personifies the collective soul and acts as the Father and Mother of his subjects. Dignity and prestige are his indestructible attributes. Popular instinct refuses to admit any other constitutional form allowing the accession to the rank of head of the State through an election amidst the dispute of parties and clans. The devolution of the royal office must be beyond the control of politics and be determined only by a monarchical status. The young sovereign who is continuing in France his bright studies will be the first modern monarch of Annam. He will come back with a sufficient maturity of mind to understand the nobility and the dangers of his task. He will find his adviser in France’s representative. Choosing himself his ministers, organizing a renovated administration, he will help us to apply in full the regime of Protectorate. A new Annam will take form, the face of which will shine in the middle of the Indochinese group, a group the final constitution of which will be that of an association of States under French suzerainty.

It is obvious that any other policy would end up in a dangerous autonomy, by placing a sovereign trained by us in an archaic and antiquated environment. We shall place his mind in front of a terrible dilemma: either revolt, or abdication. The delicate point resides therefore in the necessity of modernizing without destroying the forces of the past, in the substitution of a State adapted to the wills of renovation which manifest themselves in the majority of people’s minds, without however, in order to reach that goal, substituting for the old State innovations conflicting with the very spirit of the race.”¹¹

Pasquier would precise further his thought in the statement he pronounced before the Higher Colonial Council in its meeting on 30 April 1931: “France has respect for the treaties she has signed. She owes it to herself to respect the established form of those kingdoms and the style of exercise of the authority sanctioned by tradition. Our action must be limited to a control, the protected sovereigns having the task of regulating the internal administration of their countries. But within the framework thus maintained and under the control of French officers, it is important to define the strictly modern rules of management which would meet both the requirements of a contemporary State and the needs of a country in full development. The finalizing of this

emphasized that, regarding the draft of a decree concerning state-approved expropriations, such a decision could be taken only by the sovereign himself (“Retour en Annam de S.M. l’Empereur Bao Dai, 1931-1932”, Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 368/2939).

¹¹ Quoted in Nguyễn Thế Anh, “Les élites vietnamiennes face à l’Union indochinoise”, *The Vietnam Forum*, n° 12, Summer-Fall 1988, p. 93.

programme will begin as soon as the Governor General returns to Indochina, and its application will coincide with the definitive establishment of the young Emperor of Annam."¹²

As a matter of fact, the governor general of Indochina made known that the question of Bảo Đại's return, which was connected to that of the evolution of the French policy, had been since his appointment the object of his preoccupations. The role that he wished to assign to the Vietnamese sovereign was outlined in his report on 14 April 1931 to the Minister of Colonies: "It is certain [...] that HM Bảo Đại's action must be extremely important and even decisive, I dare say, for the history of the country of Annam. The young monarch will have the weighty task of assuming the transition between the past and the future, of conciliating the millenary traditions and disciplines of the past, essential to public peace, with the requirements, the advances, and the freedoms inseparable from modern activity. The elite of the population, who are beginning to perceive the archaisms and the inadequacies of the old mandarin and are hungry for evolution and progress, keenly wish to be governed by a modern sovereign who, as the supreme incarnation of his race, his nationality and his tradition, and without breaking with a glorious and respectable past, should nevertheless be educated in Western sciences, and motivated by the ardent thought that shines forth in the great capitals of Europe. And this sovereign, so not to disappoint his people, will have to be able not to neglect the advices of wise counsellors, but to free himself from too tight tutelages and too self-interested demands."¹³ Pasquier would come back to this again two years later, in his letter dated 10 March 1933 to the Minister of Colonies: "The policy of the protectorate [...] sets for us as first objective the encouragement and the methodical consolidation of the moral authority and the personal prestige of the monarch head of the protected State, and consequently the care of warning him against venturesome initiatives. Should this authority weaken, should this prestige wane, then all the effort patiently sustained since ten years by the Government general in order to make the Annamese State evolve would have to be called into question."¹⁴

Different considerations of timeliness, nevertheless, held up Bảo Đại's return.¹⁵ But, immediately after his getting back into his country on 6 September 1932, the convention of 6 November 1925, which had stripped the Vietnamese sovereign of his last prerogatives, was abrogated on 10 September, and an edict said of reign was published on 14 September 1932, the day of Bảo Đại's effective coming to power, announcing the changes that the new emperor of Annam intended to carry out. Thus, Bảo Đại's arrival allowed the authorities of the Protectorate to define their policy of return to a "strict protectorate regime" in Annam, through the setting up of a whole series of reforms of the government and the administration. A tour in Tonkin was organized for Bảo Đại in order to erase the bad memories of Yên Bái,¹⁶ while thought was given

¹² Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 331/2675.

¹³ "Réformes du gouvernement annamite, 1931-1933", Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 368/2940.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See Bruce M. Lockhart, *The End of the Vietnamese Monarchy*. New Haven, Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1993, pp. 59-66.

¹⁶ Of this tour, Bảo Đại was to write in retrospect: "That travel unquestionably revealed to me a new dimension of my country... I came back none the less quite disappointed by that sojourn. Indeed, I felt still more in Hanoi, where I was received as a guest whereas I was at my home, how tiny is the role that is expected from me. In fact, everything that concerns the daily life and the future of my country and of my people is forbidden to me." (S.M. Bao Dai, *Le Dragon d'Annam*. Paris, Plon, 1980, pp. 51-52).

to a project of a new government and to the different measures to envisage. The intent was to revive the royal government, for, as a confidential note of the governor general on 1 April 1933 pointed out, “the current ministers, whatever may be their age, educated in this mandarin milieu of Huế closed to every external influence, represent an outdated state of mind that is no longer in keeping with the present evolution.”¹⁷ Above all, it was a question of removing Nguyễn Hữu Bài, the Minister of Interior (*Bộ Lại*) and president of the *Cơ Mật* since 1922, who personified “the most representative sort of that old-fashioned and reactionary state of mind, filled with pride and astuteness, naturally complicated and tortuous, false and hypocritical, instinctively repugnant to any frank and loyal solution”, and was accused of wanting, ever since Bảo Đại came to power, to stand between the emperor and the government of the Protectorate, making use of his ascendancy in the *Cơ Mật* to employ all the activity of that organ of the royal government “in thwarting the influence of the representative of the Protectorate, in sterilizing the work of the diverse ministerial departments, and finally in discouraging the good will of the young sovereign.”¹⁸ The composition of the government was decided on during a talk at Huế between governor general Pierre Pasquier and Bảo Đại, and on 2 Mai 1933 a royal decree (*đụ*) proclaimed the takeover of the affairs of the country by the emperor, assisted by five ministers, Phạm Quỳnh (Cabinet Director and National Education), Ngô Đình Diệm (Interior),¹⁹ Hồ Đắc Khải (Finances and Social Work), Bùi Bằng Đoàn (Justice), and Thái Văn Toản (Public Works, Fine Arts and Rites).²⁰ That decree, complemented by the decree of the following 23rd of May determining the functioning and the attributions of each of the organism of the government,²¹ specified the guiding governmental principles:

¹⁷ “Réformes du gouvernement annamite, 1931-1933”, Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 368/2940. Pierre Pasquier reported also to the Minister of Colonies that, in his conversations with Bảo Đại in Dalat on 25 and 26 February 1933, the young sovereign confirmed to him “certain facts... which proved that the Queens mothers and the Ministers remained silently hostile to a modern evolution of the manners of the Palace.” (Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 368/2939). Acting résident supérieur in Annam Thibaudeau, nevertheless, expounded that the elimination of all the old ministers would be a mistake: “To sacrifice all the old ministers would be likely to estrange a whole category of people who are still directing the future of Annam.” (Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 330/2664, “Résumé des faits politiques principaux se rattachant à la situation politique, 31/3/1933-24/7/1934”).

¹⁸ Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 368/2940.

¹⁹ Chosen by Bảo Đại instead of his brother Ngô Đình Khôi, Nguyễn Hữu Bài’s son-in-law and governor (*tổng đốc*) of Quảng Nam, who had been initially proposed to him.

²⁰ Pierre Pasquier reported on this new Cabinet to the Minister of Colonies on 10 Mai 1933 as follows: “From the old cabinet only one minister is left. It is HE Thai Van Toan who occupied the post of Finances. In the new government he will be put in charge of the ministry of Works, Fine Arts and Rites [...] He is intelligent and of a modern mind; certainly he represents a little the old state of things, but he is appointed to the only ministerial department whose effect on the policy and the administration is practically null. On no account will he be able to influence his colleagues [...] HE Thai Van Toan who was the youngest member of the old cabinet is today the most senior member of the new government. He is 48 years old. The youngest of the new ministers, HE Ngô Đình Diệm is only 34 years old. Two are about forty, Messrs Ho Dac Khai and Pham Quynh; HE Bui Bang Doan is 46 years old. It is a government of young people, all the ministers being less than fifty, whereas in the former cabinet everyone save Toan was over sixty, the first, Bài, counting 71 years.” (Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 368/2939).

²¹ See for more details: Dang Trân Xa, *Les réformes de Sa Majesté Bao-Dai en Annam*. Paris, Domat-Montchrestien, 1939, 157 p.

1. the five ministries were to be responsible organs of government with clearly defined tasks, rather than being simple channels of transmission;
2. the *Cơ Mật*, which was referred to as the Council of Ministers and was going to admit as a member the president of the Chamber of the Representatives of the People of Annam,²² was to revert to the role for which it had been initially created, so to function as a higher secret council instead of replacing the ministers in their authority and duties. Presided over by the *résident supérieur*, it was to examine the important affairs presented by the ministries before submitting them to the decision or the approbation of the throne;
3. the emperor had the effective direction of all governmental affairs, and was recognized as the sole lawmaker of his kingdom, under the condition of obtaining the agreement of the *résident supérieur*. Consequently, acts that were within the competence of his legislative power, that is to say those which conditioned and organized social life and the rights of individuals, should be submitted to the governor general's approval: it followed that acts issued by the sovereign's statutory power would have to be appended with the stamp of the head of the Protectorate in order to be enforceable. However, with regard to Tonkin²³ that was part of the kingdom in the same way as Annam, the *résident supérieur*, assisted by his private council instituted by the Robin decree of 1 December 1926, would preserve his statutory power and would continue to act in the name of the emperor.²⁴

In that way, the return to the "strict regime of protectorate" seemed to have become a reality. During the twelve months following the proclamation of the decree of 2 May 1933, the emperor personally directed seven meetings of the *Cơ Mật*, and the *résident supérieur* the twenty-three other ones. Even though only occasional, the sovereign's presence at the council of the *Cơ Mật* was an entirely new occurrence. A considerable work of elaboration of official acts and reforms was undertaken and, according to the *Résidence supérieure*: "Huế had become again the spiritual capital of the Annamese countries, and the atmosphere of the country had become healthier."²⁵ However, the reactivation of the imperial structures must be backed up, lest it should be ineffective on the ground, with measures aiming at reinforcing the high-ranking mandarins' preventive and repressive action. Political surveillance was thus entrusted to a great Minister of Interior, in charge of the direction of the mandarin personnel, that is to say more than a thousand of officials. He was to supervise the control of the released political offenders, and secret funds were allotted for this task. On the other hand, in order to put an end to the arbitrary and nepotism, a new status of the mandarinat was adopted; it determined the rights and the duties of the officials. This was accompanied by purging action in the ranks of the mandarin corps: in the space of one year, 68 mandarins were retired, among whom 46 for professional reasons. A promotion committee presided over by Marty, the Director of Political Affairs, and composed of two other members of the Bureau of Political Affairs, Granjean and Authier, the *tổng đốc* of Hà Đông, Hoàng Trọng Phu, and Ngô Đình Khôi, was equally created. Moreover, the reform of the

²² The decree of 3 July 1933, while confirming the existence of the Chamber of the Representatives of the People of Annam, specified that its attributions remained consultative: political wishes were forbidden, and wishes of an economical, financial and social nature could not be debated unless authorized by the Minister of Interior in agreement with the *résident supérieur*.

²³ The statutory regime of Tonkin was settled by the decree of 24 October 1933.

²⁴ "Rapport sur l'activité politique et administrative du Gouvernement annamite (1/5/1933-25/7/1934)", Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 330/2664.

²⁵ Quoted by Patrice Morlat, *La répression coloniale au Vietnam (1908-1940)*. Paris, L'Harmattan, 1990, p. 178.

mandarinate was to include also the institution of a body of justice of the peace in charge of the administration of justice: the separation of the executive power and the judiciary power of the mandarins should put an end, it was thought, to corruption, the source of which lay in the combination of these two powers.²⁶

The judiciary undertaking was completed by the restatement of the absolute right of reprieve of the emperor, and the reaffirmation of his authority as regards justice. Justice was dispensed in his name by his Minister of Justice. The standardization of law was achieved by the publication of a new penal code and a regulation of the civil and criminal procedure. In reality, the penal code would only be a corrected version of the Morché Code, named from the president of the Appeal Court of Hanoi who had codified for use in Tonkin a modern version of the ancient Code of Gia Long.

All these measures seemed at first sight to prove that substantial modifications had been made to the political regime of the country. In fact, they represented on the contrary a return to the situation before the convention of 6 November 1925. The political status of Cochinchina and Tonkin remained unchanged and, in spite of an apparently greater participation of the royal government in the power of decision, the part of the latter was reduced both in the extent of the affairs and the initiative and responsibility of the decisions, as every act of some importance had to undergo a double control, that of technical advisers below and that of the protectorate at the top.²⁷ Social and political conditions were not in the least transformed and the pompously proclaimed restoration of the imperial powers did not remove an inch of power from the Résidence supérieure; it aimed even, by means of the committee directed by the administrator Marty and the integration of the president of the Chamber of the Representatives of the People of Annam in the *Cơ Mật*, at better controlling the machinery of the Vietnamese political life. The evidence of this could be found in the crisis that shook the royal Cabinet barely three months after its formation, and that led to the dismissal of Ngô Đình Diệm because of his persistence in wanting to alter the decisions that had emptied the 1884 protectorate treaty of its content – those events were tersely related under these terms: “Since the resignation (17/07/1933) and the dismissal (*sắc* of 1 September 1933) of the first incumbent of the Ministry of Interior, Ngô Đình Diệm, due much more to the excitement of a misplaced self-pride and to an arrogance that had become offensive to royal dignity, than to well-defined political reasons, this ministry is directed by Thái Văn Toản, minister of Finances of the ancient *Cơ Mật* and only forty nine years old.”²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

²⁷ Raymond Guillien, professor at Hanoi Higher School of Law, could still write in 1939 that “almost all the protectorates have accepted the infiltration of officials of the protecting State into the services of the protected State, in greater or lesser numbers, in higher or lower situations, sometimes the highest, those for example of the three résidents supérieurs of Annam, Tonkin and Cambodia. Which makes it that protectorate comes close to indirect administration. Which makes it even so that some protectorates could have become little by little downright colonies. Without entering into any detail, we shall say that Cambodia almost became a colony, which it is not, that Tonkin was in a fairly recent moment of its history a colony, which it no longer is.” (R. Guillien, “A propos des ‘Nouveaux essais franco-annamites’ de S.E. Pham Quynh”, *La Revue indochinoise juridique et économique*, 1939-III, pp. 587-588).

²⁸ “Rapport sur l’activité politique et administrative du Gouvernement annamite (1/5/1933-25/7/1934)”, Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 330/2664. See the explanation by Bảo Đại himself in *Le Dragon d’Annam*, op. cit., pp. 59-61.

In fact, the so-called restoration of the powers of the monarchy reduced the colonial government's formal responsibility towards metropolitan France and reinforced the authority of the French rulers at the expense of the ruled natives. The recourse to Bảo Đại, while it consolidated in practice the means of action of the Protectorate, seemed thus rather to partake of a recovering by the *résidence supérieure* in Annam of the control over the mandarinat. In any case, the reform of the political institutions was never really undertaken. On the contrary, having attributed the causes of the 1930-31 disturbances to the poverty of the people, to unsuitable mandarin structures, to the fiscal burden and to the world economical crisis, the French administration would prefer concrete realizations to reforms, for it deemed wiser to direct its effort towards large-scale works or to demonstrate the might of its power, when demanded by the circumstances, to expurgate the revolutionary phenomenon from the colonial space. Consequently, instead of the transformation of the realities of French control, it was the functioning of the Vietnamese royal government under that control that had been redefined.

Realizing that he disposed only of formal authority but no real power, Bảo Đại did not take long to abandon whatever desire he might have had for personal government and confined himself to being a figurehead like his predecessors, justifying himself afterwards by these lines in his memoirs: "Because of the French, the option of the reforms was forbidden to me. That of open revolt cannot succeed [...] The French must believe that I am resigned to be subjected to their law! [...] I am persuaded that my people will understand this apparent disinterest and that it is for them that I give up trying to impose my will. They will understand also that I do not wish to have any part in whatever might be decided regardless of the treaty that links us to France."²⁹

As for the Vietnamese reformist elite, which had been won over to the camp of order because of the fear of social disruptions, they were discouraged by a commitment to preserving the status quo that made do with consolidating existing state structures while deliberately putting off any fundamental political reform. Disappointed members of the intelligentsia and even certain elements of the well-off classes turned to communism, which was reorganizing itself underground, or became its sympathisers. Meanwhile, eluding repressive procedures, opponents to the colonial regime took roundabout ways to express themselves. Against the policy of restoration of the Confucian moral values and of the customs founded on them, which extolled a certain conventional image of society, the new intelligentsia set to fight in social novels and reports the backward character of the Confucian family, proposing instead individual freedom or the conceptions of proletarian literature. In Cochinchina, where the laws on the press were more liberal, the *La Lutte* group endeavoured to create a current both social and democratic to conquer elementary political and union freedoms. By means of that formula of legal political practice, the group thought it possible to overcome the incapacity of the national movement to defeat colonialism.³⁰

But the French government did not at all show itself willing to abandon the correlation of domination, even after the Popular Front came to power. Marius Moutet, the socialist Minister of Colonies, categorically asserted that it was necessary to give priority to reshaping Việt-Nam's

²⁹ *Le Dragon d'Annam*, op. cit., pp. 61-62. It should be noted that the disappearance of Pierre Pasquier following an air-plane accident on 15 January 1934 had very early deprived Bảo Đại of his warmest supporter.

³⁰ Cf. Daniel Hémerly, *Révolutionnaires vietnamiens et pouvoir colonial en Indochine*. Paris, François Maspero, 1975, p. 248 sq.

social structure over altering its political status: "I think that the time has come to give the native masses a political expression more in conformity with the present conditions, but I also think that we should do nothing politically as long as we have not given these masses a social organization, through a Labour institution and a Labour Code."³¹ If in answer to the political and social movements that developed since summer 1936 (campaign for an Indochinese congress intended for consulting the population about the wishes to be presented to the parliamentary commission of survey on the colonies, workers' strikes, etc.) some reforms were adopted (right of association in Cochinchina, abolition of the prior authorization for the publication of newspapers, nine hours working day and minimum wage), none, nevertheless, had to do with the political status of Indochina. The conviction of finding themselves confronted with a communist-led opposition explained on the contrary the insistence of the French authorities on applying the same line as that followed since 1930: consolidating the traditional elite in view of fighting against subversion. In this context, a certain revision of the policy consisting in restricting and weakening the powers of the royal government in Hué appeared again necessary. In a letter sent in February 1937 to the *résident supérieur* in Annam, governor general Brévié specified that "presently it is in our interest to give back to the Annamese monarch the prestige and authority he may have lost. He is indeed the keystone of this country's political and social edifice."³² This would lead to a cautious strategy of upgrading the Vietnamese monarchy, of which the Minister of Colonies Georges Mandel's reform project in 1939 was to represent the first step. This project, designed under the pressure of the Japanese threat, consisted in restoring to the royal government in Hué its apparent participation in the administration of Tonkin (creation of an Upper House common to both Annam and Tonkin, and participation of Tonkin in the Hué government's expenditures).³³ What mattered ultimately, was to use the monarchy and its mandarinat both as a bulwark against subversion in the countryside, and as a pole of consolidation and modernization of the Vietnamese ruling class.

Thus since 1930 the different French governments that succeeded each other constantly followed the same colonial policy in Việt-Nam, regardless of their political colouring. The same guiding principle continued to prevail: concessions were made only in small doses, and they were made not at the expense of French authority, but in order to consolidate it. In the long run, this historical deadlock over the grant of political autonomy would prove to contain the germ of conflict between French colonial power and the Vietnamese independence movement.³⁴

³¹ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Papiers d'Agents* 28, 4/125.

³² Nguyễn Thế Anh, "Vietnamese Monarchy...", *art. cit.*, p. 161.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ See Nguyễn Thế Anh, "The Formulation of the National Discourse in 1940-45 Vietnam", *Journal of International and Area Studies* (Seoul National University), vol. 9, n° 1, June 2002, pp. 57-75.

LA SECONDE GUERRE MONDIALE ET LA FIN DU SYSTÈME COLONIAL EN ASIE DU SUD-EST*

Afin de mettre la main sur les territoires étrangers susceptibles de lui offrir les matières premières dont son économie a besoin, le Japon entreprend de se rendre maître de l'Extrême-Orient. L'armée japonaise se livre donc à la conquête de la Birmanie, qu'elle achève entre janvier et mai 1942. Par l'Indochine et la Thaïlande, ouverte à ses troupes par l'accord de décembre 1941, elle envahit la Malaisie et s'empare de Singapour (février 1942). Les Indes néerlandaises sont conquises au début de 1942, et la résistance américaine réduite dans les Philippines après le siège de Corregidor (avril 1942). D'un coup, les empires coloniaux anglais, français, hollandais et américain sont disloqués, et le Japon s'assure, en quelques mois, du contrôle de toute l'Asie du Sud-Est.

Pour organiser la Grande Asie sous sa domination, le gouvernement nippon conçoit la « sphère de co-prospérité de la grande Asie orientale », c'est-à-dire qu'il tend à se substituer aux anciennes puissances coloniales dans les territoires occupés pour les exploiter à son profit. Mais ces territoires sont si éloignés les uns des autres que les convois mal protégés de la marine japonaise, disséminée dans le Pacifique, deviennent des proies faciles pour les sous-marins américains.

Au nom de cette « sphère de co-prospérité », les Japonais encouragent les mouvements de libération nationale qui, considérablement renforcés par l'éviction des puissances coloniales, sont en mesure d'envisager la prise du pouvoir. Ils attisent les sentiments anti-blancs et attendent que les nouveaux « décolonisés » leur témoignent de la reconnaissance par la fourniture d'une importante aide militaire. Des gouvernements locaux pro-japonais sont constitués, d'autant plus qu'à partir du début de 1943, comprenant qu'il ne peut plus espérer vaincre ni même obtenir un

* Extrait de Hartmut Rotermond, Alain Delissen, François Gipouloux, Claude Markovits, Nguyễn Thế Anh, *L'Asie Orientale et Méridionale aux XIXe siècles*. Paris, PUF, 1999, pp. 378-383.

compromis, le Japon s'emploie à favoriser l'indépendance des pays qu'il occupe, afin de les préparer à résister de leur côté aux Alliés.

Mais l'antagonisme surgit rapidement entre l'occupant et les populations. Une autre voie que celle de la collaboration avec le Japon se dessine, celle de la lutte révolutionnaire visant à la défaite du Japon, à la libération nationale et sociale. Telles sont les perspectives du *Việt-Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội* (Ligue pour l'indépendance du Viêt-nam, *Việt-minh* en abrégé), de la *Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army* (MPAJA), des *Hukbalahap* aux Philippines, de l'*Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League* en Birmanie. Ces mouvements sont de type « front national démocratique », réunissant les patriotes de toutes les tendances. Ils établissent leurs bases dans les jungles et les montagnes, tout en bénéficiant de l'aide des villages des plaines. Les luttes armées qu'ils animent jouent un rôle important dans la dernière phase de la guerre, ce qu'ont compris les Anglo-Américains qui ont coopéré avec eux par l'envoi de commandos spéciaux et le parachutage d'armes. Lorsque le Japon capitule et que se désagrègent les gouvernements qu'il a mis en place, ces mouvements représentent dans chacun des pays la principale, sinon la seule force politique organisée.

a) Indochine

Lorsque survient la défaite de la France, l'Indochine opte immédiatement pour la fidélité à Vichy ; il ne peut en être autrement, étant donné la pression du Japon, qui a même fait acte d'hostilité en mars 1939 lorsqu'il s'est emparé des îles Paracels. Pour le gouvernement nippon, il s'agit alors d'arrêter l'aide américaine que Tchang Kai-Chek reçoit, par le chemin de fer du Yunnan notamment. D'où l'accord du 30 août 1940 entre Vichy et Tokyo qui, tout en reconnaissant « la souveraineté française sur l'Indochine », autorise une implantation militaire japonaise au Tonkin. Il sera suivi de l'obligation faite à la France d'abandonner une partie du Cambodge à la Thaïlande rangée dans le camp japonais (9 mai 1941) et d'un autre accord, en juillet 1941, qui permet au Japon d'envoyer des troupes dans l'Indochine du Sud : celle-ci devient une base de la future offensive nippone vers Singapour et les mers du Sud.

Pendant cinq ans, l'Indochine poursuit sa vie isolée, dans des conditions économiques difficiles, le Japon effectuant des réquisitions massives de riz et de matières premières mais fournissant en contrepartie peu de produits manufacturés. D'où une hausse importante des prix et pour le Tonkin, mal approvisionné par la Cochinchine, une situation précaire qui deviendra catastrophique en 1944-1945, la famine faisant plus d'un million de victimes.

Au point de vue politique, le régime est de plus en plus franco-japonais avec un caractère paternaliste visant à rehausser le prestige des souverains indigènes, tout en accordant certaines satisfactions aux élites : réforme du mandarinat, mesures favorables aux fonctionnaires, scolarisation accrue, emploi généralisé des langues nationales, le quôc-ngu notamment, dans l'enseignement et l'administration, travaux d'utilité publique.

La situation devient plus complexe avec l'apparition, à côté de la France et du Japon, d'un protagoniste de plus en plus agissant : en 1941 s'est constituée, sous la direction de Hồ Chí Minh, la « Ligue pour l'Indépendance du Viêt-nam », plus connue sous le nom de *Việt-minh*, qui se propose de lutter pour l'indépendance contre Vichy et Tokyo, puis d'établir une République démocratique et sociale. Le mouvement est soutenu par la Chine et l'Union soviétique, et reçoit même certaines avances américaines.

Le drame éclate à l'instigation du Japon qui, le 9 mars 1945, attaque toutes les garnisons françaises et instaure un régime qui ruine l'autorité française. Au Cambodge, les Japonais font proclamer le 13 mars l'indépendance du gouvernement du jeune roi Norodom Sihanouk, qui a été mis sur le trône en 1941. Au Laos, sous la pression japonaise, le roi Sisavang Vong déclare son royaume indépendant le 8 avril. Au Viêt-nam, l'empereur Bảo-Đại abolit le traité de protectorat avec la France et confie à Trần Trọng Kim, nationaliste du parti Đại Việt pro-japonais, le soin de former le gouvernement. Mais, le 19 août 1945, c'est le Viêt-minh qui s'empare du pouvoir à Hanoi et élimine tous ses adversaires. Le 2 septembre, Hồ Chí Minh proclame, avec l'indépendance reconquise, la naissance de la République démocratique du Viêt-nam, alors que le Corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient débarque à Saigon.

b) Birmanie

En Birmanie, le déclenchement des hostilités en Europe en 1939 a eu pour conséquence un durcissement des positions nationalistes. Des liens sont établis avec des représentants japonais, et des agents de l'organisation Minami s'infiltrèrent dans le pays. Les membres du *Dobama* sont alors partagés en deux tendances : certains souhaitent obtenir le soutien des communistes chinois et, à travers eux, de l'URSS, d'autres, plus nombreux, placent leur espoir dans le Japon. C'est cette tendance qui l'emporte, et en 1940, un groupe de jeunes nationalistes, les « Trente camarades », quitte secrètement le pays pour suivre un entraînement militaire à Formose. Ce groupe forme le noyau de « l'Armée de l'Indépendance », dirigée par Aung San, l'ancien président de l'Union des Etudiants de Rangoon, qui aide les Japonais à entrer en Birmanie en 1942 et à en chasser les Anglais. La Birmanie est proclamée indépendante par l'occupant en août 1943. Mais les difficultés font vite surface, et Aung San, dont pourtant les Japonais ont fait un général de l'armée birmane et un ministre de la défense, crée un mouvement de résistance, la « Ligue populaire antifasciste de libération » (*Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League*), qui adopte dès août 1944 un manifeste invitant la population à la lutte contre l'occupant japonais. Au début de 1945, une liaison régulière est établie avec l'Inde et, le 27 mars, l'Armée nationale birmane se soulève contre les Japonais. Elle combat d'une façon indépendante jusqu'à l'arrivée des troupes britanniques. Rangoon est libéré le 1^{er} mai 1945.

c) Malaisie

En Malaisie, les Britanniques sont impuissants à défendre la grande base navale qu'ils ont aménagée à Singapour, et il suffit à l'armée japonaise de trente-huit jours pour conquérir toute la péninsule. Singapour capitule le 8 février 1942. Les vainqueurs cherchent à se concilier les Malais et les Indiens, mais se montrent méfiants à l'endroit des Chinois : si les Malais sont réceptifs aux appels lancés par les Japonais pour créer la « sphère de co-prospérité de la grande Asie orientale », les Chinois, en revanche, se montrent beaucoup plus actifs dans la résistance et sont en conséquence tout particulièrement visés par les forces d'occupation. La *Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army* (MPAJA) est constituée en majeure partie de Chinois communistes ; n'y participent que quelques petits groupes de Malais. Au moment de la capitulation du Japon, la MPAJA a pu s'assurer le contrôle d'une grande partie du pays, et se pose comme autorité de fait aux Britanniques, revenus à Singapour le 3 septembre 1945. Mais elle remet à la *British Military Administration* ses armes et prononce sa dissolution en décembre 1945. Leur force politique, leur

prestige de résistants et d'alliés des Anglo-Américains mettent les Chinois en position forte et leur permettent d'espérer obtenir de Londres un statut préférentiel dans le pays.

d) *Philippines*

Le 10 décembre 1941, trois jours après Pearl Harbour, les Japonais débarquent à Luzon. Dès janvier 1942, l'administration japonaise déclare que les Philippines recevraient l'indépendance pourvu qu'elles coopèrent à l'établissement de la « sphère de co-prospérité de la grande Asie orientale ». La majorité de la classe politique s'accommode du nouveau régime. La nouvelle République des Philippines est inaugurée le 14 octobre 1943 ; son président, José Laurel, conclut le même jour un pacte d'alliance militaire, politique et économique avec le Japon.

La résistance s'affirme toutefois. Dans toutes les régions de l'archipel, des groupes de guérilleros se constituent. Une petite partie se situe politiquement à droite, mais la majorité relève de l'Armée de libération du pays (*Hukbalahap*, en tagalog "Hukbong Mapagpalaya Nang Bayan"), à direction communiste. Les méthodes de contre-guérilla appliquées par les Japonais et par le parti créé par eux, le Kalibapi, avivent les haines, transformant la lutte en guerre de libération nationale.

A partir de l'été de 1944, l'action des guérillas s'étend, paralysant peu à peu les autorités de Manille. Le 20 octobre 1944, les Américains débarquent quatre divisions à Leyte, puis convergent sur Manille dont ils s'emparent le 23 février 1945. Le gouvernement philippin se réinstalle à la capitale dès la prise de la ville.

e) *Indes néerlandaises*

Les Japonais débarquent à Java en février 1942. Le 8 mars, les Hollandais capitulent sans condition. L'archipel est placé sous administration militaire : Sumatra est rattachée à la XXVe Armée avec Singapour et la Malaisie, Java à la XVIe Armée, Bornéo et le Grand Est à la Marine. Toute activité politique est interdite. L'objectif des Japonais étant de mobiliser toutes les ressources économiques et humaines de l'archipel pour soutenir leur effort de guerre, les cultures d'exportation sont modifiées dans ce sens. Des centaines de milliers de travailleurs obligatoires sont réquisitionnés, parfois envoyés sur d'autres fronts (Birmanie), où beaucoup trouveront la mort.

Pour se concilier les musulmans, les Japonais créent un office des Affaires religieuses. Ils font libérer les dirigeants nationalistes, comme Sukarno et Hatta, auxquels ils confient des postes de responsabilité. Sukarno voit dans cette collaboration surtout le moyen d'obtenir des avantages permettant à l'Indonésie de progresser vers l'indépendance. Mais s'organisent aussi des réseaux de résistance clandestins dont l'activité est de préparer l'après-guerre.

En mars 1943 est mis sur pied à Java un mouvement de masse, le *Putera* (Centre des forces du peuple), avec à sa tête Sukarno, Hatta, Ki Hadjar Dewantoro, le chef de la Muhammadiyah, et des conseillers japonais. Sukarno va utiliser les moyens mis à sa disposition pour diffuser dans tous les villages, sous le couvert de la propagande japonaise, les idéaux nationalistes. Les Japonais acceptent aussi de former un corps militaire, la *Peta* (Volontaires défenseurs de la patrie, octobre 1943), avec des officiers indonésiens. Ce sera le noyau de la future armée indonésienne. N'arrivant toutefois pas à contrôler le Putera, les Japonais le font dissoudre en décembre 1943. Ils

regroupent alors les musulmans au sein d'une organisation commune, le *Masjumi* (Fédération des associations musulmanes), puis constituent un nouveau mouvement de masse, *Djawa Hokokai* (mai 1944), encore présidé par Sukarno, mais contrôlé cette fois par les Japonais qui, pour neutraliser les nationalistes, s'appuient sur les *priyayi*, l'aristocratie javanaise, où s'est toujours recrutée l'administration coloniale.

INDOCHINA DURING WORLD WAR II (1940-1945)

The outbreak of the Second World War in Europe in September 1939 provided Japan with the opportunity of expansion into Southeast Asia. But, apart from Japan's ultimate goal of creating the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere", an economically self-sufficient realm under Japan's control, Tokyo premeditated few other political designs for any of the countries that the Japanese imperial army would liberate from colonial rule. Thus, French Indochina remained under French authority almost throughout the duration of the war, unlike Malaya and Singapore, where the Japanese undertook to impose their power, or the Philippines, Indonesia, and Burma, where by mid-1943 they transferred at least partially that power to indigenous regimes composed of persons favorable to their goal.

Japan's advance into the Indochina peninsula was an extension of the conflict which began in China in 1937. In March 1939 the Japanese had taken over the Paracels islands; then, after having captured Hainan Island in September 1939, they focused their immediate interest on French Indochina, with its Red River supply route to the interior of nationalist-controlled China, and Thailand, which since 1938 had appeared to be moving towards Japan, before joining the war on the Japanese side in January 1942. France's defeat in Europe at the hands of Germany in the summer of 1940 triggered thereafter Japan's penetration into Indochina, now under the Vichy regime, nominally a Japanese ally. On 22 September 1940, a convention was signed that granted the Japanese the right to use the port of Hải Phòng as a transit base, to utilize the airfields of Hanoi, Lao Cai and Phủ Lạng Thương, and to station troops in northern Indochina, thereby cutting off the aid route to nationalist China. In return, Japan pledged to recognize French sovereignty and to respect French territorial integrity in Indochina. But in the winter of 1940-41, the French were forced by the Japanese to concede to Thailand the Lao territories on the right bank of the Mekong River and the Cambodian provinces of Battambang, Siem Reap and Sisophon. Then in July 1941, after the German invasion of the USSR, French colonial authorities in Indochina had to acquiesce to the landing of 30 000 Japanese soldiers in the southern part of Indochina, supposedly to protect the country now completely cut off from metropolitan France.

The French colonial administration in Indochina remained therefore in place during the war years from 1940 to March 1945, but had to co-exist with the Japanese military command in Saigon. For a brief while, in 1940-42, it seemed as if Japan would devote special attention to exploiting the resources of French Indochina and would seek to develop its economy to meet Japan's own requirements. The French were obliged to sign a trade agreement with Tokyo in May 1941, which, whereas it allowed the Japanese to acquire the commodities they needed in exchange for their industrial products, seemed to presage a new era of investment. But that possibility was forestalled by Japan's move into the rest of Southeast Asia, leading to an intensification of the war and the consequent unavailability of investment funds for Indochina, while economic hardships resulting from the discontinuation of normal trading links and the dedication of key resources to the use of the Japanese war machine revealed soon the ruinous effects of the Japanese occupation.

Meanwhile, needing the French bureaucracy and police to insure the management of the economy and to maintain law and order, Japan adopted the expedient policy of "upholding tranquility" in Indochina by leaving the French administration intact until almost the very end. This enabled Admiral Decoux, appointed by the Vichy regime to be Indochina's governor-general, to devote his energy to preserve the most of powers he could. The French grip on Indochina appeared even tightened during the course of the Second World War. Swift and harsh measures were taken against all attempts at rebellion, such as in November 1940, when, upon hearing of the Japanese entrance into northern Vietnam and of the threatened Siamese invasion of eastern Cambodia and southern Laos, the Communists staged a general insurrection in southern Vietnam. The rebellion was easily crushed, but the subsequent severe political repression did not entail any Japanese intervention on behalf of the Vietnamese. However, forced by the circumstances to open more widely Indochina's Civil Services to native officials, Decoux tried to win over the sovereigns of the three countries of Indochina and their elites by enhancing their prestige. At the same time, he launched a sport and youth movement in view of developing Marshal Pétain's cult and loyalty to France, and applied to Indochina the Vichy regime's slogan "National Revolution" and the virtues of "Work, Family, and Fatherland". While keeping a watchful eye on Vietnamese political activists, he favored activities glorifying Vietnamese national culture with the hope of thwarting Japanese propaganda magnifying the Greater Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere.

Paradoxically, the call by the Vichy regime for a "national revival" had anti-colonial effects. In fact, the French colonial government's inability to keep the Japanese out of their colony destroyed the myth of French invincibility, and contributed to the erosion of French authority and loss of French prestige. Under these circumstances, the Japanese occupation helped to revitalize various anti-French movements in Vietnam and unleash nationalist aspirations. The Japanese apparently felt the necessity to put all political groups together under the same banner, especially of the exiled prince Cường Đê, to whom Japan had given shelter for nearly four decades. Without their initiative and assistance, it might have been impossible for those scattered political groups, and individuals that were supposed to be pro-Japanese, to be unified, as they were isolated from each other because of their factionalism and regionalism. Particular support was lent to two politico-religious sects in Cochinchina, the Cao Đài, whose main area of recruitment covered Saigon and the area to the northwest of Saigon, and the Hòa Hảo, with its main area of influence along the southwestern Vietnamese-Cambodian border.

But in the final analysis, it was to the Vietnamese communists that the Japanese occupation, along with the preservation of the French colonial regime, had lent support in their rise to power

by giving them their justification. The Vietnamese communists now had an opportunity to blend their esoteric dogmas with the more easily understood nationalist cause of resistance to both the French and the Japanese. The fatal distraction of French colonialism gave them a chance to acquire a base in the jungles of the area of Cao Bằng and Bắc Sơn (*Việt Bắc*), close to the Sino-Vietnamese border, from where they concentrated on building up a revolutionary nucleus, and establishing contacts across the border with Chinese nationalist leaders, American and Free French liaison officers, and other anti-Japanese Vietnamese nationalists. Getting down to shed its pre-1941 image of class struggle and proletarian internationalism, the Indochina Communist Party set up the League for the Independence of Vietnam (*Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội*), or Việt Minh, consisting of members from various subgroups called National Salvation Associations. The objective of the Việt Minh front, conceived as a purely patriotic organization, was to liberate Vietnam from the unholy alliance of the “colonialist” French and the “fascist” Japanese. Therefore, until 1945, this movement confined itself largely to developing a politico-military base and spreading patriotic-nationalist propaganda throughout Vietnam; it concentrated in particular on mobilizing the peasants of the Red River Delta against taxation, corvée labor, rice requisitioning by the administration to meet Japan’s requirements for food supplies. In spite of the harsh repression they encountered from both the French and the Japanese, Việt Minh cadres managed to maintain a network of secret cells in almost every city and village in Vietnam, and to infiltrate all pro-French and pro-Japanese organizations.

Forced into a steady withdrawal by Allied victories, the Japanese had to move the headquarters of their Southern Army from Manila to Saigon in November 1944. In January 1945 retreating troops were used to reinforce Japan’s strength in Indochina that the Japanese High Command was ordered to hold at all cost. The situation changed dramatically on 9 March 1945. The Japanese military, anticipating an Allied offensive and fearful that the French colonial army in Indochina might turn against them, carried out a coup de force by removing the French administration and imprisoning the French army and colonial administrators. “Immediate independence” was granted to the monarchies of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. In all three countries, they suggested to their respective sovereigns to repudiate French protectorate and to form “independent” governments with a diverse collection of nationalist politicians. But in Vietnam in particular, the declaration of independence proclaimed by the emperor Bảo Đại concerned only north and central Vietnam, and had no formal effect for the time being on the political situation in Cochinchina, still under Japanese authority. On the other hand, the new Trần Trọng Kim cabinet, composed of men having not much experience in political organization, lacked both credibility and the ability to impose its authority over the provinces. From the very moment of its inception, it was, in a sense, living on borrowed time, since much of its political authority and all of its military security were tied to the Japanese. Moreover, the new regime was confronted with a cataclysmic famine in the north, caused by a combination of bad weather, by French and Japanese requisitions of peasants’ rice, and the disruption of communication between the various parts of the country caused by intense Allied bombing. The worsening of the famine to crisis proportions coincided with the Japanese granting of independence to Vietnam, so that the problem of hunger in the north was an ongoing concern during the early weeks of the existence of the Trần Trọng Kim government.

In a situation of political vacuum created by the removal of the French colonial administration, the weakness of the Vietnamese substitute government, the absence of a mass nationalist organization ready to fill the empty political space (in some areas of the south,

however, local organizations such as the religious sects Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo formed what amounted to local warlord governments), and the concentration of Japanese minds on an increasingly desperate military situation, the Việt Minh seized the opportunity to spread out networks of “liberation committees” from their northern base, and to build up their political and military infrastructure. The Japanese did not bother to send their troops into the northern area and the Việt Minh took over the region, expanding their “liberated zone” beyond Cao Bằng to include seven provinces. They issued a proclamation calling on the people to rise up against the Japanese “and make of Vietnam a strong country, free and independent.” The famine in the north provided them with the possibility of eliminating the anti-communist village leaders, and spreading a mass movement of political and social salvation in the countryside. The status and credibility of the Việt Minh movement was greatly enhanced by the fact that its communist leaders had, since 1941, maintained a firm anti-French (the colonial enemy) and anti-Japanese (the fascist enemy) stance, and not the least by their military links with the Allies.

On 15 August 1945, the Japanese suddenly capitulated. Overnight, the Allies, and particularly the South East Asia Command (SEAC), were faced with the responsibility of overseeing the surrender and repatriation of an almost intact Japanese army in Southeast Asia, the release of Allied and civilian prisoners held by the Japanese, the maintenance of law and order, and the eventual transfer of power to civilian governments. The zone of responsibility for SEAC covered Malaya, Singapore, Sumatra, Java, Thailand and the southern part of Indochina. As a consequence of American pressure, nationalist China assumed similar responsibilities over northern Indochina. But, considerably overstretched, SEAC was in no way capable of carrying out all its tasks and filling the vacuum of power left by the Japanese surrender. Therefore, the Việt Minh leader, Hồ Chí Minh, judged the moment right to seize power openly, through the agency of the liberation committees. Supported by massive demonstrations in provincial capitals, the Việt Minh took control of the whole country between 19 and 25 August. As the Việt Minh soldiers marched into Hanoi, there were demonstrations in the city celebrating independence, and the Việt Minh youth groups and militia took over the city, while the Japanese stood by. By 27 August, Việt Minh committees were set up in all the provinces to administer them. In the meanwhile, on 25 August in the imperial city of Huế Emperor Bảo Đại abdicated, and the Trần Trọng Kim government, which had already resigned on 18 August, transferred its power to a Việt Minh committee. On 2 September 1945, to a huge tumultuous crowd of Vietnamese in Hanoi as well as to the nation and the world at large, Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed the independence of Vietnam and the formation of a provisional government for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

By their reluctance to encourage and concede Vietnamese independence, the Japanese had therefore helped to discredit the pro-Japanese nationalist groups that they would have preferred to leave in command in Vietnam. On the other hand, Japanese forces still in control of Indochina after Japan’s surrender might have crushed the Việt Minh forces, had Bảo Đại and Trần Trọng Kim requested them to do so. Bảo Đại rejected nevertheless such an extreme measure, and agreed to transfer his power to the Việt Minh because he imagined that, with the American support secured by Hồ Chí Minh, independence could be guaranteed to Vietnam. In the end, even a Vietnamese government led by Communists who had been generally anti-Japanese seemed to the Japanese preferable to returning the country to the French. This benevolent neutrality observed by the Japanese explains the ease with which the Việt Minh could come to power.

The war years and the period of Japanese occupation had thus fundamentally changed the political environment of Indochina. Mass nationalist movements had taken root during these

years and had been able to seize power and establish some form of governmental legitimacy. However diverse might have been their ideological complexions and their internal divisions, they were by no means keen on the restoration of colonial authority. Acquainted with the vulnerability of the French and tested in their own strength during these years, the Việt Minh would prepare themselves for an all-out war for independence. Yet, the bridgehead of military authority South East Asia Command established in September 1945 in southern Indochina allowed the landing of a company of the French Expeditionary Corps, bent on reestablishing colonial control over all of Indochina, while in the northern part of Vietnam, other Vietnamese political groups returned in the wake of Kuomintang troops and endeavored to abolish all the political and administrative structures set up by the Việt Minh. The end of World War II was not to usher in a new era of peace for the Vietnamese, but a most destructive period in their history.

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THE FORMULATION OF THE NATIONAL DISCOURSE IN 1940-45 VIETNAM*

The period of Japanese occupation fundamentally changed the Vietnamese political environment, by unleashing nationalist aspirations and causing an upsurge in political involvement on the part of Vietnamese throughout the country. The course of events of the years 1940-1945 affected thus a definite transformation of Vietnam's society and politics. However, whereas the national image was going through a process of crystallization, diversity of ideological complexions and lack of clear-cut ideological directions, of organized structures, of definite programs of action, and of substantial mass bases generally characterized the different groups which became entangled in the struggle against foreign domination, contrary to the Indochina Communist Party, whose success in taking advantage of the effects of the power vacuum following Japan's capitulation on 15 August 1945 was the result of long-term revolutionary preparations involving propaganda and organizational work. Indeed, the movement leading Vietnam to independence in the so-called August Revolution followed a broadly based nationalist program, but was controlled from within by the well-organized Indochina Communist Party. In order to understand how such a program could have won wide popular support, this paper examines the different ways the national idea was formulated by the main historical actors of the 1940-45 period, opposing especially the discourse of the old monarchical political system to the Việt Minh's patriotic-nationalist propaganda. From this viewpoint, a thorough analysis of the Declaration of Independence of 2 September 1945 would help to point out that, while implying no unity whatsoever, at least at this stage, it was in reality a profoundly Marxist-Leninist document, in spite of the use of Enlightenment ideals and 19th century nationalism and the apparent absence of the Marxist-Leninist philosophy that the Việt Minh subscribed to.

Keywords: August Revolution, Bảo Đại, Cường Để, Decoux, Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, Hồ Chí Minh, Indochina Communist Party, Trần Trọng Kim, Việt Minh.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the literati having most actively participated in the struggle for his country's emancipation, Huỳnh Thúc Kháng could not help complaining in the 1930s about the lot of Vietnam, in his words "a nation forced for a long time to forget itself"¹, as it appeared to him that no scope was given for moderate nationalism to take root or build mass strength. He was far then

* Paper presented at the Colloquium *Decolonisations, loyalties and nations. Perspectives on the wars of independence in Vietnam – Indonesia – France – Netherlands*, Amsterdam, November 30 - December 1, 2001.

¹ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (Aix-en-Provence), *Indochine NF*, 54/632.

from imagining that, after 1945, he was to become the vice-president of a nation freed almost overnight from the yoke of colonialism.

Indeed, the war years and the period of Japanese occupation between 1940 and 1945 had changed fundamentally Vietnam's political environment. During this period, mass nationalist engagements could take root; among the revolutionary movements, the Việt Minh was able to seize power and establish some form of governmental legitimacy. It would seem therefore meaningful to endeavour to observe how, behind the historical actors' deeds and words throughout those decisive years, the conception of the Vietnamese nation was formulated, and in particular how the Việt Minh could have succeeded in appropriating the national idea, at the expense of other nationalist groups.²

2. THE AFFIRMATION OF THE VIETNAMESE NATIONAL REVIVAL

In August 1940, Japan's Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke declared Indochina to be a part of the Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (*Tōa Kyōeiken*). In the eyes of Vietnamese patriots and intelligentsia, Matsuoka appeared as a promoter of the emancipation of East Asia. This led to a vision of a Vietnam independent from French rule within the framework of the Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere under Japan's tutelage. Many Vietnamese might have believed in Japan's motto "Asia for the Asians" and the feasibility of an equal and peaceful confederation. But the expedient policy of "maintaining tranquillity" in Indochina adopted by Japan by leaving the French regime intact until almost the very end did not fail to induce many a patriotic Vietnamese to ask why Japan professed to liberate Asia on the one hand, yet on the other hand retained the colonial government. Anyway, a complicated situation laden with ambiguities was created. The Japanese had promised to free the Asian nations from Western domination but at the same time they needed the French bureaucracy and police to insure the management of the economy and to maintain order. Admiral Decoux, appointed by the Vichy regime to be Indochina's governor-general, did his best to preserve the most of powers he could. Forced by the circumstances to open more widely the Indochinese Civil Services to native officials, he tried to win over the Indochinese sovereigns and their elites by enhancing their prestige. At the same time, he launched a sport and youth movement in view of developing Marshal Pétain's cult and loyalty to France, and applied to Indochina the Vichy regime's slogan "National Revolution" and the virtues of "Work, Family, and Fatherland". Drawing a distinction between the beneficent political force of patriotism and the subversive political force of nationalism, he endeavored to enlist the support of the Indochinese, with the hope of thwarting Japanese propaganda magnifying the Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The cultural movement that resulted from his policy gathered however such a dynamic that it was no longer possible for the French to stop or to control it.

Vietnamese society had indeed gone through significant changes. The main social trend was the erosion of French supremacy and loss of French prestige. The French colonial authorities' inability to keep the Japanese out of their colony destroyed the myth of French invincibility which had persuaded most Vietnamese to acquiesce superficially in the face of French rule. A new generation of Vietnamese grew up within a context characterized by the decline of the long-held superiority of the white man, while native pride was rediscovered, patriotism encouraged. Paradoxically, the call by the Vichy regime for a French "national revival" based upon patriotism,

² For the succession of the events of these years, could be consulted with profit, beside Marr 1995a, Dommen 2001: 47-118, Hammer 1966, Huynh Kim Khanh 1982, Isoart 1982, Shiraiishi 1985, Smith 1978, Valette 1993, Vu Ngu Chiêu 1986, and Woodside 1976.

familism and work, and opposed to individualism had anticolonial effects, as Vietnamese intellectuals began to study their own society and its past for the secrets of a Vichy-like “national revival” and mass action they hoped it might contain. Different groups were created to prepare the cultural ground for a future of national independence. Such reviews as *Thanh Nghị* (Pure Opinion) or *Tri Tân* (Understand Modernity) for example devoted themselves from May-June 1941 to researching the synthesis between Vietnamese national culture and western cultures, in order to modernize the former and propagate it by the means of a “silent revolution”.³ Radical thinkers associated with the *Hàn Thuyên* publishing house reinterpreted Vietnamese historical figures, in particular the Quang Trung emperor whom they saw as a representative of the peasant class struggling against feudalism. Writers such as Ngô Tất Tố began to describe the miseries of the peasants (*Việc làng*, Affairs of the Village). All of this contributed to a cultural effervescence without which the Revolution that was going to break out in August 1945 would have been nothing more than an ordinary military seizure of power.⁴

Disrupting the long French rule of almost eighty years, the Japanese occupation helped revitalize various anti-French movements in Vietnam. In 1939, Cường ĐỀ, to whom Japan had given shelter for nearly four decades, had already been encouraged to form the Việt Nam Phục Quốc Đồng Minh Hội (League for the National Restoration of Vietnam), better known as the Phục Quốc League.⁵ Inside Vietnam, the Japanese also encouraged all political groups, including the Đại Việt in north Vietnam, the Catholic bloc led by Ngô Đình Diệm and his brothers in central Vietnam, and the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo religious sects in Cochinchina, to join Cường ĐỀ’s organization. Leftwing Vietnamese, like Tạ Thu Thâu, who had serious doubts about the vision of an independent Vietnam within the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, were by no means averse to discuss with some Japanese, such as the socialist writer Komatsu Kiyoshi, the possibility of forming “an anti-French national united front” (Marr 1995(a): 137, note 265). Komatsu enjoyed also special friendship and trust with Phạm Ngọc Thạch, one of the leading members of the Communist-led resistance in Cochinchina.⁶ All those groups, including a portion of the remnants of the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (Vietnamese Nationalist Party) (Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ 1989), and individuals that were supposed to be pro-Japanese were, however, isolated from each other because of their factionalism and regionalism. The Japanese apparently felt the necessity to put them together under the same banner; without their initiative and assistance, it might have been impossible for those scattered political groups to be unified. In September 1943, Trần Văn Ân, founder of the Phục Quốc branch at Saigon, rallied various groups in the south, including the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo religious sects, and expanded his and Cường ĐỀ’s organization to be a wider alliance covering various trends. In the north, representatives of various

³ A vigorous nationalism was the common denominator of the intellectuals contributing to these reviews, as they were clearly conscious of participating in the collective fate of the Vietnamese nation (see Brocheux 1988).

⁴ Nguyễn Tường Bách, the younger brother of the activist writer Nguyễn Tường Tam (penname Nhất Linh), then the editor of the weekly *Ngày Nay* (Today), had in particular left vivid descriptions of the tumultuous atmosphere of the time (see Nguyễn Tường Bách 1981).

⁵ Several members of this League had been encouraged by the Japanese to form an armed group of about 2,000 men, the Việt Nam Kiến Quốc Quân (Army for the National Reconstruction of Vietnam), attached to the General Headquarters of the Japanese South China Army in Canton. In September 1940, this small force accompanied the Japanese 5th Division to attack and occupy Lạng-sơn, adjacent to the Sino-Vietnamese border.

⁶ Komatsu 1954: 19. Phạm Ngọc Thạch was even proposed by the Governor Minoda and the Consul Ida to take the responsibility of organizing youth groups in Cochinchina, as related by Trần Văn Giàu (Alain Ruscio 1989-1990: 188-189). This kind of contacts could have contributed to the willingness with which the Japanese authorities in Saigon, headquarters of the Japanese Southern Army, agreed to hand over power and arms peacefully to native authorities, following Japan’s surrender in August 1945.

groups got together and set up a unified organization called the Đại Việt Quốc Gia Liên Minh Hội (National League of the Great Viet) at the end of 1943 or at the beginning of 1944 (Shiraishi 1985: 5).

But in the final analysis, it was to the Vietnamese Communists that the Japanese occupation, along with the preservation of the French colonial regime, had lent support in their rise to power by giving them their justification. The Vietnamese Communists were actually the ones who had consciously and effectively converted the craving for independence of the Vietnamese population into a formidable force, and they now had an opportunity to blend their esoteric dogmas with the more easily understood nationalist cause of resistance to both the French and the Japanese. The fatal distraction of French colonialism gave them a chance to acquire a base area on the Sino-Vietnamese border, from where they concentrated on building up a revolutionary nucleus, and establishing contacts across the border with Chinese nationalist leaders, American and Free French liaison officers, and other anti-Japanese Vietnamese nationalists.

The adoption of communism, as one author wrote, “lent the Vietnamese drive for national liberation a determination and a solidity in the teeth of massive military opposition which are unique in modern history (Dunn 1972: 145).” It has been generally assumed that, until the introduction of communism, nationalism was equated squarely with anticolonialism. Fight French colonial rule to regain national independence, without letting questions of ideology or new political institutions obstruct the path of decolonisation, such was the basis of all prior anticolonial movements. But, following the introduction of communism, nationalism became equated with “revolution”.⁷ The anticolonialist rebel became the nationalist revolutionary. Not only did he want independence, he also advocated *cách mệnh* (revolution). A powerful concept in the Vietnamese political vocabulary, *cách mệnh* was complementary to the concept *thiên mệnh* (heavenly mandate) or the legitimacy to rule over others as conferred by a mandate from Heaven. In this sense to go into revolution meant to take away that mandate. In the usage of the Vietnamese Communists, however, *cách mệnh* assumed the connotation of the Western concept “revolution” and meant more than just the removal of the right to rule. It also meant a total, radical transformation of the Vietnamese social, economic and political structure, involving both the destruction of the French colonial rule and the collaborative Vietnamese monarchy, and the building of a new Vietnamese society.

In its early days, the Communist movement did not consider nationalism as capable by itself of saving Vietnam from bigger imperial enemies with modern weapons, partly because what Vietnamese mass patriotism could be mobilized was largely anti-modern. Thus internationalism also became the antidote to the continuing entanglement of traditional patriotism with an energy limiting “feudalism”. The intention of erasing the old village culture was shown by the Communist stress upon literacy campaigns, and by the quickness with which the revolutionaries tried to celebrate the pantheon of their new post-feudal internationalism in the countryside. In 1931, during the unsuccessful “soviets” uprising in north central Vietnam, Communist organisers compelled Vietnamese peasants to hold “anniversary weeks” for Lenin, Liebknecht, and Rosa Luxemburg (Woodside, 1989: 152-153). The ideas Hồ Chí Minh set forth previously in his *Đường Cách Mệnh* – dividing revolution into a first stage of “national revolution” (*dân tộc cách mệnh*), which would bring an end to foreign domination with the collaboration of several classes, and a second stage of world revolution (*thế giới cách mệnh*), during which peasants and workers

⁷ The communist movement is thought to be the only one to know how to mobilize the vital forces of the nation into the service of the movement of national liberation by linking the social problems to the national question (see Huynh Kim Khanh 1982).

throughout the world would unite as one family to destroy the capitalist system and bring about universal unity (Duiker 1995: 212) – were then rejected, including the need to create a broad alliance with progressive elements throughout the country and the establishment of an independent Vietnam. Slogans referring to the issue of national independence were to be supplemented by other appeals reflecting the issue of class struggle and world revolution. One particular goal to be attained would be to overthrow old rural social structures and eliminate private landlordism, in order to end the perceived antagonism between the old feudal state and the masses.

The experience of the 1930-31 revolts had nevertheless shown the ICP the great dangers of alienating the wealthy peasantry and landlords by prematurely emphasizing class issues, and of alienating the peasantry generally by taking a dogmatic attitude towards traditional culture. In 1941 the national liberation revolution (*cách mạng giải phóng dân tộc*) again received priority. The Eight Plenum of the Indochinese Communist Party set up the League for the Independence of Vietnam (*Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội*), or Việt Minh, consisting of members from different social groups. The Việt Minh front, therefore, was initially conceived as a purely national liberation movement, not as a “New Democracy” front fighting simultaneously for national liberation and against feudalism. The Party got down thus to shed its pre-1941 image of class struggle and proletarian internationalism, in favour of class cooperation, timeless patriotism, and sublimation within a national united front. In terms of relations with the villages, one of the results was the acceptance of the ambiguous coexistence of the modern revolution with traditional village patriotism, mobilized through the multiplication of “national salvation” (*cứu quốc*) associations.⁸ Those were mass organizations, such as the National Salvation Cultural Association (*Hội Văn Hóa Cứu Quốc*) established in 1943 with ICP cadres’ assistance to recruit urban intellectuals to the Việt Minh cause and find ways of insinuating anti-French, anti-Japanese propaganda into legal newspapers and journals, the Peasants’ National Salvation Association, the Students’ National Salvation Association, the Women’s National Salvation Association, the Teenagers’ National Salvation Association, and so on. Together, these associations acted as a shield to the Party; individually, each organization translated esoteric Communist slogans into the language of its group’s members. In theory, then, the Việt Minh front was the coalition of these National Salvation Associations, through which it could impulse a broad national movement, uniting large numbers of Vietnamese regardless of their politics, and reaching down into the masses. The theme of unity and national salvation (even the Việt Minh’s main newspaper bore the title *Cứu Quốc*) enabled thus the Việt Minh to involve local populations in its cause and the socioeconomic reforms it proposed. Talk of a “genuine world republic” faded; the doctrine of a people’s war, requiring the total involvement of the Vietnamese population, invoked a revolution based on nationalism and the national popular culture. The ideology of nationalism was then given an important role in Vietnam’s political legitimation. To strengthen its claim to legitimacy, the Communist movement leadership capitalized on the compatibility between modern and

⁸ Faced with the problem of seizing power in practice, the Việt Minh found it much difficult to devise an effective strategy of revolutionary transformation in the villages. There was indeed a fundamental contradiction between the revolutionary practice of mobilizing poor peasants to establish Party control in each village and the ideological principle that rural power lay in the hands of a landlord class. Which local “ruling class” to denounce and disgrace, whereas in many villages in the North and northern Central provinces, village power was in the hands of people whose actual property did not justify their classification as landlords in any meaningful sense? (See Ralph Smith 1996: 215).

traditional Vietnamese values, seeking to fuse the legitimacy of the state socialist system with the legitimacy of Vietnam as a nation.

Yet, for the majority of the rural population, the language of modern nationalism and socialism required translation. Nationalism was therefore linked with traditional Vietnamese patriotic spirit (*tinh thần yêu nước*); to energize the resistance to French colonialism, the memory of resistance against the Chinese invasion and the Vietnamese fighting spirit (*tinh thần đấu tranh*) was evoked, and the Trưng sisters, Triệu Ẩu, Trần Hưng Đạo, Lê Lợi, Quang Trung, etc., all of whom fought Chinese invasion, were called “*anh hùng dân tộc*”, or national heroes. In discussing socialism, complex Marxist-Leninist terms were avoided; socialism was defined as a system in which the Vietnamese would “have enough to eat and enough clothes to wear in cold weather”, a system in which there was no human exploitation.

In addition to relying on the rural population to achieve its goals, the leadership also tried to enter into an alliance with both noncommunist and communist intellectuals trained during the French colonial period.⁹ Because of the Party's anti-nationalist and anti-bourgeoisie revolutionary line of the 1930s, the Communists had failed for more than a decade to attract students, intellectuals and other urban petit-bourgeois elements into their ranks. To remedy this situation, the ICP resolved during its Plenum of February 1943 to launch a “cultural front” (*mặt trận văn hóa*) to enlist the support of these urban elements (Trần Huy Liệu 1961: vol. II, book 2: 105). A document entitled *Đề cương văn hóa Việt Nam* (Theses on Vietnamese culture) was the direct consequence of this resolution (Trần Huy Liệu 1956-57: vol. X: 90-95). Published at a time when both the French colonial government and the Japanese occupying forces were outdoing each other in competing for popular Vietnamese support, it was a deliberate attempt to compete with the French and the Japanese for the collaboration of Vietnamese intellectuals. Containing less than 1,500 words, *Đề cương văn hóa* was a brief document, prepared in the form of an outline, with ideas left incompletely developed. Divided into four main parts, this document summarized Vietnamese literary and cultural development during the early decades of the twentieth century; called attention to the danger of nefarious “fascist” influences of the French and the Japanese; discussed the importance of a cultural revolution and the relationship between a political and a cultural revolution; and elaborated the urgent tasks of Vietnamese writers and artists. It emphasized the importance of Party leadership in this cultural revolution. A new Vietnamese culture, “national in character and democratic in content”, was thus postulated, and the campaign for this new culture was to be based on three principles: 1.- national (opposing all enslaving and colonialist influences, allowing Vietnamese culture to develop independently); 2.- mass (opposing every tendency that would go against the masses or away from the masses); 3.- scientific (opposing anything that would render cultural activities anti-scientific and counter-progressive). To this end, a socialist culture was to be created, in which all cultural activity was to be measured according to the degree that it stimulated simultaneously a sense of patriotism, mass consciousness, and scientific objectivity. This meant the adoption of a strict position that allowed no concept of literary and artistic ideological neutrality: the cultural medium (the printed word, music, painting, film, etc.) had no value in itself, except in its utility as a conveyor of an

⁹ This alliance would crumble when the Party leadership imported Maoist practices of ideological rectification (*chỉnh huấn*).

ideological message. Neutrality would be considered immoral, if not treasonable, when the country was caught in a struggle for survival as an independent nation.¹⁰

For Communist activists, the *Đề cương văn hóa* became an important guideline in their propaganda activities. Several non-Communist writers – such as Nam Cao, Ngô Tất Tố, Tô Hoài, Nguyễn Hồng – later claimed to be much influenced by this document (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1991: 89-107). With it, the goal of creating a “new culture” was proclaimed by the Việt Minh. Nevertheless, care was taken in the ensuing years to avoid that the educational efforts in the countryside to generate a new culture and new attitudes should not be couched in terms of class struggle, and that peasant and minority superstitions and cultural traditions should be treated with respect. Educational cadres were encouraged to go out of their way to understand and respect local customs in order to “create an atmosphere of sympathy”; only on this basis should they then put forward new ideas and encourage the people “to abate their superstitions”. The point that the revolutionary struggle at this stage was purely patriotic and had no class-based ingredient was going to be given even greater force in November 1945, when the Indochina Communist Party was officially “dissolved”. More than this, conscious of the need to compensate for “breadth” of patriotic appeal by “depth” of political education, if the ideological coherence of the revolution was to be preserved, the leadership pursued what might be called a policy of “anti-feudalism by stealth”, involving among other things a campaign for literacy, the introduction of universal elementary education, and recognition of the equality of nationalities and the equality of sexes.¹¹ Clearly, the new culture was not simply designed by the Communists to “democratize” the Vietnamese countryside and wipe out feudal attitudes; it was also designed to generate at the grass-roots level the beginnings of an irresistible momentum towards a socialist mentality and a socialist society. As Trường Chinh would put it, Vietnamese society was undergoing “metamorphosis” from the age-old Confucian values of the traditional society to the beginning of the adoption of a newly imported ideology.

3. THE BLURRED IMAGE OF THE NEW STATE OF VIETNAM

¹⁰ The themes of *Đề cương văn hóa Việt Nam* were to be elaborated further in July 1948 in an official report of the Central Committee of the ICP (then non-existent on paper) read by Trường Chinh, the Party's Secretary-General, at the Second National Congress. The report, entitled *Chủ nghĩa Mác và văn hóa Việt Nam* – Marxism and Vietnamese culture (see Trường Chinh 1974) – approached frontally the many theoretical issues concerning Vietnamese literature and the arts: the relationship between material life and spiritual life, between economic and political reality and cultural development; possibility of artistic neutrality; relationship between art and propaganda, etc. It repeated all the themes that had been outlined in the earlier document: the need for a cultural revolution to complement the political revolution; the denial of literary and artistic neutrality in a society fighting for political survival; the necessity of socialist realism as the “correct” approach to literary and artistic expression; and finally, the importance of the three guiding principles of the Vietnamese revolutionary culture: national, mass, and scientific. As a statement of objective of a Communist party-in-power, this document was to become an authoritative guideline for Vietnamese literary and artistic endeavour for many years to come, channeling Vietnamese writers and artists into one direction, that of serving the prevalent revolutionary line of the Communist party.

¹¹ Christie 2001: 95. In August 1946, Trường Chinh offered an analysis of the theoretical basis of the Vietnamese revolution in an essay entitled *The August Revolution* (Hanoi, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), particularly emphasizing the need to initiate a genuine cultural revolution in the minds of the Vietnamese peasantry: it was necessary that the mobilization of the peasantry should be deep-rooted and based, not simply on patriotic fervour, but on the notion that their lives would be entirely changed for the better, in order to nurture the “subjective” factor of the revolutionary will of the people as a whole.

By the turn of 1945, the Japanese judged that a coup de force against the French in Indochina would be indispensable, and on 26 February 1945 a final plan for the coup was agreed upon, which projected to purge the French and give “immediate independence” to the three Indochinese nations. After the coup had been actually carried out on 9 March 1945, Lt. General Tsuchihashi Yūitsu, the newly appointed commander in chief of the occupation forces in Indochina, suggested to Bảo Đại to declare the abolition of the 1884 protectorate treaty.¹²

Two days after the Japanese coup, on 11 March 1945, a royal ordinance was promulgated, acknowledging Japan’s “liberation” of Vietnam and noting proudly that there was now an independent Vietnamese government after eighty years of French protectorate:

“In view of the world situation and of the situation of Asia in particular, the government of Vietnam proclaims publicly that as of today, the protectorate treaty with France is abolished and that the country takes back its rights to independence.

Vietnam will endeavour with its own means to develop so as to merit the status of an independent state and will follow the directives of the common Manifesto of Greater East Asia to bring the help of its resources to common prosperity.

Therefore the government of Vietnam has confidence in Japan’s loyalty and is determined to collaborate with this country to reach the aforesaid objective.

Respect to this.

Huế, the 27th day of the 1st month of the 20th Bảo Đại year (S.M. Bao Dai 1980: 104).”

The declaration was followed on 17 March by Bảo Đại’s first edict as an “independent” Emperor, which established the principle *dân vi quý*, meaning “the most precious thing is the people”, as the basis for his reign from that point on. The expression was borrowed from Mencius: “the people are precious, the country is ranked second, and the ruler is of little value”. The ordinance stated that Bảo Đại would take control of the government and, with the help of men of talent and virtue, work to rebuild the country.¹³ This was clearly a historic moment and historic opportunity. However, Bảo Đại admitted in his memoirs that the situation was far from favourable, as his bureaucracy, weakened over the years by French control, simply did not have the capacity to run the country: “For many, the idea of independence is linked to the disappearance of all regulation. Taxes are no longer collected, protests spread. Authority deteriorates. Disorder prevails a little everywhere. Yet the government does not have at its disposal any force to assure order. Devoid of officers, the police services and the militia are incapable of intervening. Only the Japanese forces would be in a position to restore order, but I refuse to ask them to do so (S.M. Bao Dai 1980: 113).”

At any rate, the significance of the circumstances did not escape Bảo Đại. Exclaiming: “we have seen the realization of the dream which patriots have held for so long,” he vowed that his own wish was “to cultivate a national and patriotic spirit and guide the youth in taking responsibility for opening up the country, raising the people’s standard of living, and increasing production (Lockhart 1993: 142).” Regretting that he had been unable to have direct contacts

¹² It was widely touted then that Cường Để would make a triumphant return to Vietnam to replace Bảo Đại on the throne. But Tsuchihashi stated that his principle was not to interfere in Vietnam’s domestic affairs, and that Bảo Đại’s fate should not be decided by Japan, but by a formal institution such as Vietnam’s national assembly.

¹³ Lockhart 1993: 137. Bảo Đại’s edict raised hopes for a wider popular participation in government in order to “set limits” on royal power and preserve the people’s rights without having to depend on the benevolence of a particular ruler (*Ibid.*: 145).

with “the nation” as he had wished, he challenged the Vietnamese to “unite into one national bloc” in order to work toward the “total independence” which they would have to earn. In an address read on 8 May 1945, he promised a constitution whereby the “co-operation between the ruler and the people” would mark the transition from absolute monarchy to a form of government where the people’s rights are clearly recognized (Lockhart 1993: 144)."

Bảo Đại also appealed to the Allies to acknowledge the independence of Viet Nam. As the Gaullist Government had made its intention to restore the French colonial system in Indochina entirely clear through its declaration of 24 March 1945,¹⁴ only a fortnight after the Japanese coup, he sent a special message to General de Gaulle, a message vibrant with patriotic emotion and declaring without ambiguity his nation’s will for self-determination:

“I am addressing the people of France, the country of my youth. I am addressing also her leader and liberator, and I wish to speak as a friend rather than as a chief of state.

You have suffered too much during four deadly year for you not to understand that the Vietnamese people, who possess twenty centuries of history and a often glorious past, no longer want to, no longer can undergo any foreign rule or administration.

You would understand still better if you could see what is happening here, if you could feel this desire for independence which is in everyone’s heart and which no human force can any longer restrain. Even if you come to reestablish a French administration here, it will no longer be obeyed: each village will be a nest of resistance; each former collaborator an enemy, and your officials and colonists will themselves ask to leave this atmosphere which they will be unable to breathe.

I beg you to understand that the only way to safeguard French interests and France’s spiritual influence in Indochina is to recognize frankly the independence of Vietnam, and to give up any idea of reestablishing French sovereignty or a French administration under any form whatsoever.

We could so easily reach an agreement and become friends, if you would cease to claim to become our masters again (S.M. Bao Dai 1980: 114-115).”

It remains that, while reclaiming Vietnam’s rights of independence, Bảo Đại’s proclamation said that Vietnam now considered itself to be an “element” in Japan’s Greater East Asian system. His declaration of independence, on the other hand, directly concerned only north and central Vietnam. Although it inspired hopes in Cochinchina, it had for the time being no formal effect on the political situation in that region. Reminding the Vietnamese that Japan’s definition of “independence” was a severely limited one, Governor Minoda would state on 29 March 1945 that no one should misunderstand the fact that Cochinchina was under Japanese authority. Thus, the Japanese failed to recognize the critical divergence between their own notion of independence (*dokuritsu*) and the independence that the vast majority of the Vietnamese population were looking for: the concept of an independent Vietnam that was free from French colonial rule but comprised within Japan’s Greater East Asia was essentially incompatible with the ideals of most Vietnamese, for whom independence should not only be from France, but also from any form of foreign rule.

¹⁴ “The Indochinese Federation will comprise, together with France and the other sections of the community, a French Union whose foreign interests will be represented by France. Indochina will have a federal government of its own, presided over by a governor-general who will be chosen from either the natives or the French nationals resident in Indochina.” (See Isoart, 1982: 46). From the start, the French government’s declaration was totally outdated and contained all the germs of the future disagreements between the French and the different Vietnamese parties. The unity of Vietnam was not acknowledged, and the terms “nation” or “state” appeared nowhere.

Trần Trọng Kim, a respected figure who had been in exile since the beginning of 1944, was offered the premiership, and his cabinet was formed on 17 April. The Trần Trọng Kim government's first policy statement was to call on Vietnamese of all social classes to unite and develop their patriotic spirit. It promised to free imprisoned "patriots", to do everything possible so that "politicians still in exile" could return home, and vowed to avoid abuses and corruption, to strengthen the country's independence, and to ignore personal or partisan interests (Lockhart 1983: 148). However, the government of Trần Trọng Kim was, in a sense, living on borrowed time from the moment of its inception, since much of its political authority and all of its military security were tied to the Japanese – there was no Ministry of Defence in the Cabinet, and the government general, now taken over by the Japanese, continued to take decisions concerning Vietnam. Moreover, the regime was confronted with a cataclysmic famine in the north, caused by a combination of bad weather, by French and Japanese requisitions of peasants' rice, and the disruption of transportation between various parts of the country caused by Allied bombing of Indochina (Nguyễn Thế Anh 1998 & Furuta 1998). The worsening of the famine to crisis proportions coincided with the Japanese granting of independence to Vietnam in March, so that the problem of hunger in the north was an ongoing concern during the early weeks of the existence of the Trần Trọng Kim government. Despite serious attempts made to deal with the famine, bringing at least partial relief, 500,000 to 600,000 people died by June 1945 in the Red River Delta alone.

Having broken as much as possible with the administration established by the French, the new government lacked most of the resources and the qualified manpower necessary to build up a comparable system of its own. While the regime was able to implement some measures aimed at strengthening its independence from the colonial legacy, these changes were rather more psychological than structural. For example, the name "Vietnam" was used officially to designate the entire country (implying the desire of territorial unification), and in French usage "Vietnamien" came to replace the somewhat loathed term "Annamite". Huế was restored to its pre-colonial name of Thuận Hóa. Trần Trọng Kim himself selected a national flag and national anthem which, although probably more influenced by Confucian tradition than many young nationalists would have preferred, were at least symbolic of Vietnam as a unit.

This is not to say that the regime was devoid of positive accomplishments. Initial steps toward fiscal, educational, and judicial reforms were taken, while at the same time, outlets that had not existed under colonial rule were provided for nationalist sentiment. There was renewed attention to heroic figures from Vietnamese history, and new freedom of the press allowed the expression of anti-French feelings of many kinds. Mass political participation was now heartily encouraged – including street demonstrations, meetings and marches propagating a spirit of cultural and political independence. On a more concrete level, the mobilization of youth begun by the Decoux regime was continued, but the focus of loyalty was now "Vietnam" rather than "French Indochina". Through the Thanh Niên (Youth) movement created under the initiative of the Minister of Youth, Phan Anh, and his assistant, Tạ Quang Bửu, youth groups were formed not only in urban centres but also in rural areas. In Cochinchina, the Japanese also permitted the formation of the Thanh Niên Tiền Phong (Youth Vanguard) led by Phạm Ngọc Thạch. The Thanh Niên programme thus mobilized tens of thousands of youngsters who later rallied to the Việt Minh flag (in the name of national independence and unity rather than for Marxism-Leninism).

Trần Trọng Kim got down also to a Vietnamization process ranging from the adoption of Vietnamese romanized script as the official language in government offices and in classrooms to the change of street, city and regional names (such words as Annam or Trung Kỳ, Tonkin or Bắc Kỳ, Cochinchina or Nam Kỳ were gradually replaced by the new terms Trung Bộ, Bắc Bộ, Nam Bộ), from the free formation of nationalist parties to a Vietnamization of the French colonial administration through the replacement of French officials by Vietnamese bureaucrats. This Vietnamization process was however complicated by the political issues of independence and territorial unity. Not prepared to grant Vietnam immediate and complete independence, Japan did not even recognize Vietnam diplomatically. Yet, Trần Trọng Kim enjoyed considerable autonomy in North and Central Vietnam, as long as he did not obstruct Japan's strategic goals. His main preoccupation was to try to win concessions from the Japanese that would enable his government to present a more convincing face to the public. Already in June nationalist groups were publicly criticizing the government for failing to reintegrate Cochinchina with the rest of Vietnam, for not obtaining administrative control of the cities of Hanoi, Haiphong and Đà-nẵng (Tourane), and for allowing the Japanese to retain the different services of the former *Gouvernement général de l'Indochine* (Sûreté, Post Office, Finance, Railways, Public Works, Education, Justice). In July, Trần Trọng Kim was able to work out with General Tsuchihashi, the commander in chief of the Japanese occupation forces in Indochina, a timetable for the transfer of all the above powers except control of Cochinchina. Then, in the first days of August, Tsuchihashi agreed to the appointment of a Vietnamese viceroy for Cochinchina, and Bảo Đại officially designated Nguyễn Văn Sâm to that position on 14 August.¹⁵

But the country, on the verge of collapse and faced with rising anarchy,¹⁶ urgently needed charismatic leadership, federative political conceptions, as well as administrative experience, things that Trần Trọng Kim and his government did not seem to possess. Lack of leadership was too apparent. Considered up to then to be a king who reigned but did not govern, Bảo Đại could not possibly attract mass support. Although Trần Trọng Kim had great moral influence among the intellectuals, he was far from being a political leader suitable in such a volatile situation. Among his associates, there were several talented men, but they were more technicians than politicians, having not acquired much experience in mobilizing politically mass movements. They could not fully understand the extent of the revolutionary forces already at work, whereas there was an alternative government being formed in the mountains that did understand revolution and indeed was doing everything possible to give the revolutionary wheel a firm push.

Neither did Trần Trọng Kim's government have the means to bring about effective national unity. It is true that, in order to give it support, the Japanese sponsored the unification of various Đại Việt formations in North Vietnam and created the Tân Việt Nam Đảng (New Vietnam Party) in Central Vietnam. But not all pro-Japanese groups stood behind Trần Trọng Kim. The most hostile were the Catholic "dissidents" in Huế, led by Ngô Đình Diệm and his brothers; from them rumors circulated that Cường Để and Ngô Đình Diệm were to take over power when Japan granted Vietnam its true independence.

Faced with mounting difficulties, as well as with the perspective of Japan losing the war and the disturbing information of the Việt Minh's successes especially in the countryside, the Trần

¹⁵ By the time Nguyễn Văn Sâm arrived in Saigon a week later, groups associated with the Việt Minh were largely in control, and he formally turned power over to them the next day.

¹⁶ The French-created administrative structure had remained nearly intact, but a state of confusion persisted after the Japanese coup. Some officials left their posts to take refuge in bigger cities and, under the prevailing conditions, it would take months to bring the system back to normal. Time, however, was not on Trần Trọng Kim's side.

Trọng Kim government even thought of resigning. At the same time, Bảo Đại accepted the cabinet members' request to invite the Việt Minh, which obtained allied support, to form a new government. Thus, before the capitulation of Japan, the decision of transferring authority to the revolutionary forces had already been reached. By their reluctance to encourage and concede Vietnamese independence, the Japanese had therefore helped to discredit the pro-Japanese nationalist groups that they would have preferred to leave in command in Vietnam. On the other hand, Japanese forces still in control of Indochina after Japan's surrender might have crushed the Việt Minh forces, had Bảo Đại and Trần Trọng Kim requested them to do so. Bảo Đại rejected nevertheless such an extreme measure, and agreed to transfer his power to the Việt Minh because he imagined that, with the American support secured by Hồ Chí Minh, independence could be guaranteed to Vietnam. In the end, even a Vietnamese government led by Communists who had been generally anti-Japanese seemed to the Japanese preferable to returning the country to the French. This benevolent neutrality observed by the Japanese explains the ease with which the Việt Minh could come to power.

4. THE NATIONAL DISCOURSE AFTER THE AUGUST REVOLUTION

In a situation of political vacuum created by the removal of the French colonial administration, the weakness of the Vietnamese substitute government, the absence of a mass nationalist organization ready to fill the empty political space (in some areas of the south, however, local organizations such as the religious sects Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo formed what amounted to local warlord governments), and the concentration of Japanese minds on an increasingly desperate military situation, the Việt Minh seized the opportunity to spread out networks of "liberation committees" from their northern base. The Japanese did not bother to send their troops into the northern area and the Việt Minh took over the region, expanding their "liberated zone" beyond Cao Bằng to include seven provinces. They issued a proclamation calling on the people to rise up against the Japanese "and make of Vietnam a strong country, free and independent." Denouncing Bảo Đại's proclamation of independence as "bogus independence" (*độc lập bánh vẽ*), they warned: "In overthrowing the French yoke, the Japanese plan to occupy our country and turn it into a Japanese colony where they will reserve to themselves the monopoly of plundering our people, abusing our women, slaying our patriots. They are not here to liberate our people. They are here to seize our rice stocks, our cotton, our oil; they will arrest all our young men and turn them into Japanese cannon-fodder (Hammer 1968: 99)." The famine in the north provided the Việt Minh with the opportunity of eliminating the anti-communist village leaders, and building a mass movement of political and social salvation in the countryside. "National independence" and "seize paddy stocks to save the people from starvation" became the slogans around which the people were mobilized. Underground cadres infiltrated nearly all "patriotic" organs and associations. Besides, the status and credibility of the Việt Minh movement was greatly enhanced by the fact that its Communist leaders had, since 1941, maintained a firm anti-French (the colonial enemy) and anti-Japanese (the fascist enemy) stance, and not the least by their military links with the Allies.

Events were moving rapidly towards the climax of the August Revolution. Conditions were ripe for general insurrection, and the Việt Minh were on the scene to take over power. There was

no effective government to forestall them, and no organized independent group to compete with them. As a result, the Việt Minh impelled a broad national movement, uniting large numbers of Vietnamese regardless of their politics, and reaching down into the masses.¹⁷ As military support they had not only Võ Nguyên Giáp's small army, but also the young people who had been trained under Phan Anh and Tạ Quang Bửu. Both men were to become members of the new revolutionary government and the young people they organized were in the forefront of the revolution, impregnated with nationalist ideals. The Japanese having capitulated on 15 August 1945, Hồ Chí Minh judged the moment right to seize power openly, through the agency of the liberation committees. Supported by massive demonstrations in provincial capitals, the Việt Minh took control of the whole country between 19 and 25 August. As Võ Nguyên Giáp and his soldiers moved into Hanoi, there were demonstrations in the city celebrating independence. Bảo Đại's representative, Phan Kế Toại, surrendered his authority to the revolutionaries; and the Việt Minh youth groups and militia took over the city, while the Japanese stood by.

In the old imperial city, Bảo Đại watched these developments uncertainly. There was no longer a government at Huế, and Huế too now had its revolutionary committee. Rapidly, Bảo Đại announced that he was prepared to turn over power to the Việt Minh if that was the people's wish. After having received a telegram from Hanoi informing him that a provisional revolutionary government had been established and asking him to turn over power, he responded that he was ready to abdicate immediately but that he wished to have a formal ceremony for the transfer of power in order to fulfill his responsibility to the people. He then proceeded to promulgate his edict of abdication, dated 25 August 1945:

The happiness of the people of Vietnam!

The Independence of Vietnam!

To achieve these ends, we have declared ourself ready for any sacrifice and we desire that our sacrifice be useful to the fatherland.

Considering that the unity of all our compatriots is at this time our country's need, we recalled to our people on August 22: 'In this decisive hour of our national history, union means life and division means death.'

Considering the powerful democratic spirit growing in the north of our kingdom, we feared that conflict between north and south could be inevitable if we were to wait for a National Congress to decide us, and we know that this conflict, if it ever occurred, would plunge our people into suffering and would play the game of the invaders.

¹⁷ The situation in the south was somewhat different from the north. In addition to the Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo sects, the southern branch of the League Phục Quốc and various minor Đại Việt parties provided the Japanese occupying power with instruments of political control and manipulation of popular opinion that it lacked in the north. They formed the basis of the United National Front, formally constituted on 14 August 1945, and represented a powerful counter-revolutionary force that the ICP in Nam Bộ had to overcome if it was to carry through a successful general insurrection. By the end of 1943 the Việt Minh had not yet developed as an effective mass organization in the same way as in the north. Here, it was the officially sponsored youth movement, the Vanguard Youth (Thanh Niên Tiền Phong), which provided the legal mass organization through which the Party worked. With the organization of the Vanguard Youth by Phạm Ngọc Thạch, all the districts of Nam Bộ were covered by a dense network directed by the Communist Party and enabling the Nam Bộ Committee to become the actual power next to the formal power of the Japanese. By August 1945 the Vanguard Youth had about a million members in Nam Bộ and 200,000 in Saigon. The Vietnam Trade Union Federation was another powerful, clandestine, mass organization, with about 100,000 members in 300 unions in Saigon on the eve of the general insurrection.

We cannot but have a certain feeling of melancholy upon thinking of our glorious ancestors who fought without respite for 400 years to aggrandize our country from Thuận Hóa to Hà Tiên. We cannot but experience a certain regret while thinking of our twenty years' reign, during which we were in the impossibility of being of help appreciably to our country.

Despite this, and strong in our convictions, we have decided to abdicate and we transfer power to the Democratic Republican Government.

Upon leaving our throne, we have only three wishes to express:

1) We request that the new Government take care of the dynastic temples and royal tombs.

2) We request the new Government to deal fraternally with all the parties and groups which have fought for the independence of our country even though they have not closely followed the popular movement; to do this in order to give them the opportunity to participate in the reconstruction of the country and to demonstrate that the new regime is built upon the absolute union of the entire population.

3) We invite all parties and groups, all classes of society, as well as the royal family, to show solidarity in unreserved support of the democratic Government in order to consolidate the national independence.

As for us, during twenty years' reign, we have known much bitterness. We would rather live as a simple citizen of an independent state than as the king of a subjugated nation. Henceforth, we shall be happy to be a free citizen in an independent country. We shall allow no one to abuse our name or the name of the royal family in order to sow dissent among our compatriots.

Long live the independence of Vietnam!

Long live our Democratic Republic!

Huế, Kiên-Trung Palace, 25 August 1945 (S.M. Bao Dai 1980: 120-121).

Read to a large crowd during the formal abdication ceremony held on 30 August in front of the Ngọ Môn gate in Huế, Bảo Đại's abdication edict was all the more moving as it was the first time for the Emperor to be called upon to speak in public.

Bảo Đại also promulgated an edict directed at the royal family (S.M. Bao Dai 1980: 121-122). Evoking the 388 years of history since the first Nguyễn Lord established himself in Thuận Hóa, he acknowledged that it would bring great sadness to all of them if he were to give up the inheritance of these four centuries of rule. However, he reminded them of his attachment to the *dân vì quý* philosophy and of his vow that he would rather be a citizen in a free country than the ruler of an enslaved one. Compared to the sacrifice of "hundreds of thousands" of compatriots who had lost their lives for their country over the past eighty years, he said, his abdication meant little. He called on the members of royal family to support the new government and preserve Vietnam's independence in order to demonstrate true loyalty (*trung*) to him and filial piety (*hiếu*) toward their dynastic ancestors.

Both of these texts made clear Bảo Đại's will to step aside on behalf of the superior interest of the nation, threatened with a civil war that he clear-sightedly predicted. He affirmed also unambiguously that he was transmitting voluntarily his mandate, lending in this way legitimacy

to the regime that was to succeed him.¹⁸ Yet, few have ever thought of comparing the deeply nationalist accent of Bảo Đại's discourse with the declaration of the foundation of the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam read by Hồ Chí Minh on 2 September 1945, to a huge tumultuous crowd of Vietnamese in Hanoi as well as to the nation and the world at large:

“We hold truths that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

This immortal statement is extracted from the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. Understood in the broader sense, this means: “All peoples on the earth are born equal; every person has the right to live to be happy and free.”

The Declaration of Human and Civic Rights proclaimed by the French Revolution in 1789 likewise propounds: “Every man is born equal and enjoys free and equal rights.”

These are undeniable truths.

Yet, during and throughout the last eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the principles of “freedom, equality and fraternity,” have violated the integrity of our ancestral land and oppressed our countrymen. Their deeds run counter to the ideals of humanity and justice.

In the political field, they have denied us every freedom. They have enforced upon us inhuman laws. They have set up three different political regimes in Northern, Central and Southern Vietnam (Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina) in an attempt to disrupt our national, historical and ethnical unity.

They have built more prisons than schools. They have callously ill-treated our fellow-compatriots. They have drowned our revolutions in blood.

They have sought to stifle public opinion and pursued a policy of obscurantism on the largest scale; they have forced upon us alcohol and opium in order to weaken our race.

In the economic field, they have shamelessly exploited our people, driven them into the worst misery and mercilessly plundered our country.

They have ruthlessly appropriated our rice fields, mines, forests and raw materials. They have arrogated to themselves the privilege of issuing banknotes, and monopolized all our external commerce. They have imposed hundreds of unjustifiable taxes, and reduced our countrymen, especially the peasants and petty tradesmen, to extreme poverty.

They have prevented the development of native capital enterprises; they have exploited our workers in the most barbarous manner.

In the autumn of 1940, when the Japanese fascists, in order to fight the Allies, invaded Indochina and set up new bases of war, the French imperialists surrendered on bended knees and handed over our country to the invaders.

Subsequently, under the joint French and Japanese yoke, our people were literally bled white. The consequences were dire in the extreme. From Quảng-Trị up to the North, two millions of our countrymen died from starvation during the first months of this year.

On March 9th, 1945, the Japanese disarmed the French troops. Again the French either fled or surrendered unconditionally. Thus, in no way have they proved capable of “protecting” us; on the contrary, within five years they have twice sold our country to the Japanese.

In fact, since the autumn of 1940, our country ceased to be a French colony and became a Japanese possession.

¹⁸ Arthur Dommen doubted, nevertheless, that Bảo Đại knowingly and of his own free will transferred his undisputed authority as emperor to Hồ Chí Minh's government of the DRV (see Dommen 2001: 112).

After the Japanese surrender, our people, as a whole, rose up and proclaimed their sovereignty and founded the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

The truth is that we have wrung back our independence from Japanese hands and not from the French.

For these reasons, we, the members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world: "Vietnam has the right to be free and independent and, in fact, has become free and independent. The people of Vietnam decide to mobilize all their spiritual and material forces and to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their right of Liberty and Independence (Porter 1981: 28-30).

This declaration, which was the formulation of a political entity, was designed to set the overall tone of the government for both domestic and foreign consumption (Marr 1995b: 221-231). For the Vietnamese people, it evoked the symbols of unity in a national framework and the fundamental right to socioeconomic welfare within a collective whole to state that independence was an accomplished fact, to be defended totally, without compromise.¹⁹ Reflecting both the historical contingencies and the indigenous political culture, it also emphasized how the French had lost their mandate as "protector" through their subservience to Japan and their partial responsibility for the death of up to two million Vietnamese. For the Allies, the declaration considered that Vietnam's independence corresponded to what Allied leaders had pledged at international conferences to claim that the country ought to be granted recognition. The emphasis on the provisional character was thus not related only to the need for national elections and a constitution, but also signalled to foreign governments that it would be possible to negotiate longer-term arrangements.

However, although the Communists carefully played down class contradictions within Vietnam at this stage, they provided, in Clive J. Christie's terms, an almost textbook example of the application of the criteria of "antagonistic" and "non-antagonistic" contradictions in the international sphere (Christie 2001: 95). First of all, it was vitally important to identify international forces that were fundamentally hostile to the objectives of the Vietnamese revolution – that is, where there was an inherent "contradiction" between these forces and the Vietnamese revolution – and at the same time to distinguish, at any given time, between those contradictions that were "antagonistic" and those that were temporarily "non-antagonistic". This perspective was important for the conduct of foreign policy, since in practical terms it enabled the Vietnamese revolutionary government to build alliances and isolate particular enemies, while at the same time maintaining a proper Marxist historical perspective on the course of events. It was also important internally, since it gave local Việt Minh cadres a theoretical base on which to understand that today's friends could become tomorrow's enemies.

In March 1945, the fault-line between "antagonistic" and "non-antagonistic" contradiction had been placed between the Japanese and other world forces of fascism on the antagonistic side, and all "anti-fascist" forces on the other. In the eyes of the Communist leadership, therefore, while the Free French government fully intended to resume colonial control in Vietnam, and while there was an inherent "contradiction" between Free France and revolutionary Vietnam in

¹⁹ The declaration also demonstrates the large degree to which the Western axiomatic emphasis on civil rights (liberty and equality) had shaped the discursive practices of a new generation of Vietnamese revolutionary leaders, although, within the native sociocultural logic these terms were redefined primarily in terms of the collective rights of the Vietnamese in relation to their colonial masters (see Hy V. Luong 1992: 131).

the long term, in the short term the Free French and Vietnamese revolutionaries had a common interest in ousting Japan from Indochina; therefore, their relationship at this stage was “non-antagonistic”.

Once Japan surrendered, however, the axis of antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradiction shifted. The principal contradiction was now no longer that between global fascism and global anti-fascist democracy, but between colonialism and national liberation: that is, between the French government and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This change in the international situation was signaled in the wording of the declaration. By quoting from the American Declaration of Independence, with its quintessential statement of “bourgeois-democratic” rights, including the right of national self-determination, the Vietnamese declaration was highlighting the “contradiction” between French colonialism and American anticolonialism. By then going on to quote from the French “Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen” that was issued at the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789, the Vietnamese declaration was drawing attention to the “contradiction” between the stated “bourgeois-democratic” values of the French Republic, and its colonial practice. Whereas de Gaulle had stated that “France claimed the right to recover its sovereignty over Indochina”, the declaration argued that “our people have seized back Vietnam from the hands of the Japanese, not the French”, then went on to abrogate “all colonial relations” with France, all treaties signed between France and Vietnam, all “special privileges” of France on Vietnamese territory.

The Vietnamese Declaration of Independence was thus a profoundly Marxist-Leninist document. Unlike other declarations of independence, it did not appeal to the “inherent” values of the Vietnamese people, or invoke the idea that the Vietnamese nation had some kind of unchanging core identity or “soul” that was being redeemed. Rather, the declaration reflected the fact that independence was considered as just part of a long-term dialectical process that had a vital international dimension, in which the declaration could play a pragmatic role (Christie 2001: 96).

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The Việt Minh theme of national unity and independence, however, captured the hearts and minds of virtually all Vietnamese. August 1945 had been in the first instance a giant outpouring of emotion, and only secondarily a well-engineered seizure of power. Thrilled by the nation’s independence, the people took part in the festival of revolution, joining demonstrations, chanting slogans, cheering government representatives, mocking or abusing enemies, electing committees, participating in work brigades and literacy classes. A great deal of this activity was spontaneous, in the sense that individuals or small groups took the initiative on the basis of what they thought the revolution was all about, not in response to instructions from above. In a hundred different ways people indicated how the world had been turned upside down – burning local administrative records, jailing former mandarins or police agents, flouting old laws, appropriating government property, etc. Writing retrospectively, Vietnamese historians could thus conclude that the outcome of the Revolution of August 1945, the crest of a conquering, irresistible swell, depended upon the strengths of the leadership and local organization of the Việt Minh, capable through the formulation of their national discourse of “leading the popular masses in a multiform struggle and defining for the nation and its diverse social classes a precise program and definite prospects for the future (Etudes Vietnamiennes: 95).”

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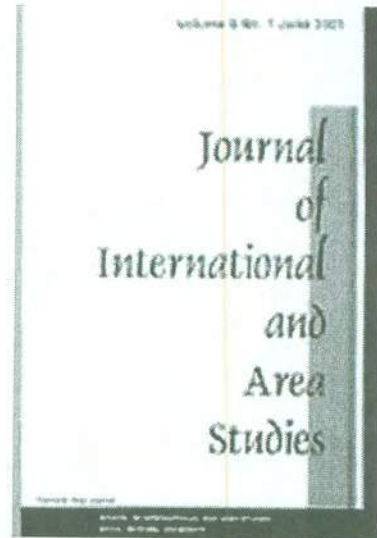
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JAPANESE FOOD POLICIES AND THE 1945 GREAT FAMINE IN INDOCHINA*

Immediately after the fall of France to Germany in June 1940, Japan exerted diplomatic pressure on the government of French Indochina to gain bases and a strategic position in northern Vietnam and to sever the Red River route which had been used to send supplies to Nationalist China. It further expanded its position by creating bases in southern Indochina in mid-1941.¹ In this fashion, Japan effectively occupied Indochina without having to destroy the French administration, honouring a pledge to respect French sovereignty and French territorial integrity in that part of the world. In addition, the signature of a commercial treaty and a navigation convention in Tokyo in May 1941 gave the Japanese the right to acquire the commodities they needed in exchange for their industrial products. The Empire of the Rising Sun, whose requisites

* Revised edition of « La famine de 1945 au Nord-Viêt Nam », *The Vietnam Forum* 5 (Winter-Spring 1985), pp. 81-100. Published in: *Food Supplies and the Japanese Occupation in South-East Asia*, edited by Paul H. Kratoska. Houndmills, Macmillan Press, 1998, pp.208-226.

¹The fiftieth anniversary of the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia has rekindled interest in its political and economic effects on the area. Nevertheless, the greatest problem researchers are confronted with is the scarcity of precise numerical data. For former French Indochina, the only statistical sources remain mainly the collection of *Annuaire statistiques de l'Indochine*, however dependable these materials may prove to be. In his article «Japan's Role in the Vietnamese Starvation of 1944-45», *Modern Asian Studies* 29,3 (1995): 573-618, Bùi Minh Dung, the latest author to study the matter, has also to rely entirely on them for the figures necessary for his analysis, in spite of the considerable use he made of recent Japanese and Vietnamese publications. This is perhaps the reason why most authors have rather emphasized the political aspects. See Ralph Smith, «The Japanese Period in Indochina and the Coup of 9 March 1945», *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9,2 (1978): 268-301; Masaya Shiraishi, «La présence japonaise en Indochine (1940-1945)», in Paul Isoart ed., *L'Indochine française 1940-1945* (Paris, PUF, 1982): 215-241; Nguyễn Thế Anh, «La famine de 1945 au Nord-Viêt Nam», *The Vietnam Forum* 5 (1985): 81-100; Masaya Shiraishi, «Vietnam under the Japanese Presence and the August Revolution», *International Studies* (Suntory Toyota International Centre for Economics and Related Disciplines) 1985/2: 1-34; David G. Marr, «Vietnam 1945: Some Questions», *The Vietnam Forum* 6 (1985): 155-193 and *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1995); Stein Tonnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945. Roosevelt, Hồ Chí Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War* (London, Sage, 1991). Yet, Lin Hua, *Chiang Kai-Shek, de Gaulle contre Hồ Chí Minh (Vietnam, 1945-1946)* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1994), is the only one determined to ignore economic subjects altogether.

in rice became more pressing as its armies were developing their action in territories farther from their departure bases, managed in this way to gain control of the greater part of Indochina's foreign trade.

From a social and economic standpoint, the Japanese occupation involved measures whose ruinous effects soon came to light. Above all, impounding the vital resources of Indochina caused a significant modification of its economy. Imports quickly slumped owing to the disruption of regular communications with France, while exports declined as Allied submarines sank more and more Japanese ships.² Indochina had to meet Japan's requirements for rice and raw materials, and at the same time to deal with the shortfall of manufactured articles that Japan was unable to provide in sufficient quantities.³ The population suffered from shortages of various industrial goods needed for daily consumption, and increasingly from food shortages as Indochinese production was tapped for export to Japan.⁴

To compensate for Japan's interference and the consequences of the loss of economical balance, Admiral Decoux, the general governor of Indochina, endeavoured to set up a type of planned economy consisting in limiting severely the supply of staple commodities and in controlling ever more tightly production and trade, with the creation of such monopolistic agencies as the Cereal Committee (*Comité des Céréales*), which was established in December 1942 and the executive organ of which, called *Comptoir des Céréales*, had the monopoly of the purchase of paddy crops.⁵ As resources dwindled away, a restrictive regulation was enacted to prohibit the free transaction of more and more products, and to subordinate their use to administrative authorization.⁶ The use without administrative authorization of all chemical and metallurgical goods, either imported or of local production, that were necessary to enterprises and industries, was prohibited. This control was not to be restricted to products intended for manufacture and industry: wherever supplies became insufficient because of low production or because of

² In 1939, exports were worth 350,000,000 piastres and imports 240,000,000 piastres; in 1945, they totalled respectively 18,000,000 and 17,000,000 piastres [Lê Châu, *Le Viêt-Nam socialiste, une économie de transition* (Paris, Maspero, 1966): 57].

³ Indochina's importation from and exportation to Japan (in tonnage):

	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945
Imports	30,000 tons	48,400 tons	38,600 tons	6,100 tons	0,500 tons
Exports	1,395,500 --	1,609,800 --	1,435,500 --	538,000 --	58,200 --

Indochina's importation from and exportation to Japan (in value, million Fr.):

	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945
Imports	336,400	1,142,800	1,258,100	337,800	50,700
Exports	1,599,300	2,338,800	1,966,000	793,200	133,100

See *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine*, vol. 10: 1941-1942 (Hanoi, 1945): 154; vol. 11: 1943-1946 (Saigon, 1948): 156-157.

⁴ Exports of rice to Japan amounted to 468,280 tons in 1940, 583,323 tons in 1941, 961,941 tons in 1942; as for corn, 177,023 tons were shipped to Japan in 1940, 119,252 tons in 1941, 123,980 tons in 1942 (*Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine*, vol. 10, p. 176).

⁵ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (Aix-en-Provence), *Affaires Economiques*, carton 14.

⁶ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 141/1267.

transport difficulties, rationing was decided. A central supply committee was created and entrusted with determining quotas for the different regions and services. Local committees in their turn allotted the quota of each region between its provinces and main urban centres ; their activity extended to every textile product regardless of its nature or origin, and to various articles (soap, matches, sugar, etc.).

The colonial government's arbitrary intervention in the rural economy was first effected in the form of the enforcement imposed on the peasants to cultivate industrial plants, sometimes to the prejudice of the raising of food crops. This is what Admiral Decoux qualified as «the adaptation of Indochinese agriculture, until then practically centred on monoculture (paddy and corn), to the new requirements of mixed farming».⁷ The objective was to develop immediately and quickly the cultivation of textile plants, in order to make up for the shortage of fabrics, cotton and silk goods. Likewise, the total ceasing of the importation of hydrocarbons and their by-products made necessary the intensive farming of oleaginous plants, in view of manufacturing substitutive oils, fuels, and lubricants. Private organisms tightly controlled by the administration and called *comptoirs* (counters) were entrusted with the collecting, the transport and the processing of the products. In the span of three years, the surfaces occupied by industrial crops increased twofold, from 88,200 hectares in 1942 to 154,517 hectares in 1944 for the whole of Indochina. They more than doubled in Tonkin, expanding from 18,850 hectares in 1942 to 42,546 hectares in 1944, distributed as follows (the figures for the whole of Indochina are in brackets)⁸:

	Cultivated surface (in hectares)		
	1942	1943	1944
Cotton	1,000 [19,000]	3,199 [33,626]	2,990 [51,752]
Jute	3,000 [3,400]	14,200 [15,230]	12,993 [17,653]
Ramie	350 [1,300]	56 [1,025]	58 [1,174]
Peanut	5,000 [50,000]	4,600 [48,099]	4,809 [47,467]
Castor-oil plant	8,300 [10,000]	14,900 [19,678]	18,477 [29,516]
Sesame	1,200 [4,500]	2,440 [5,885]	3,219 [6,955]

The people in the countryside, nevertheless, could hardly cope with this forced reconversion: while being reduced to extreme penury regarding everyday life wares, especially clothing, they had to witness certain food plants, corn among others, being driven away from fertile lands such as the alluvial soils of the river beds, because these proved to be excellent for castor-oil and textile plants. But the administration did not care much about the preservation of the subsidiary crops, the produce of which would have in some way compensated the deficiency of the rice production for the population under dire necessity. Therefore, hostile mutterings soon made themselves heard, which the Resident superior in Annam pointed out in his report on 15 October 1944: «The general state of mind of the masses remains good; extreme attention, however, should be paid to the imposed crops. They are a heavy load: as for oil seeds and cotton, we must now display great authority in view of collecting them in the warehouses of the

⁷ Admiral Decoux, *A la barre de l'Indochine, 1940-1945* (Paris, 1949): 430.

⁸ *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine*, vol. 10, p. 89; vol. 11, p. 92-93.

monopoly. I am taking every useful step to try to obtain better results in 1945 than this year, without blinking the fact that in some places one will have to show a rather harsh attitude.»⁹

Concerning rice-growing, the French authorities introduced also a compelling system of requisitions. Their purpose was at the same time to constitute safety stocks and to «carry out the engagements» towards the Japanese, as they had agreed by the covenant of 19 August 1942 to supply to Japan the entire exportable surplus of rice during the harvests of 1942-1943, or a minimum of 1,050,000 tons of the highest quality white rice.¹⁰ According to Admiral Decoux's statement, «it matters above all to ensure the regularity of the prices and to ward off carefully any show of panic or speculative measure on the market.»¹¹ Consequently, at the end of 1942, the Resident superior in Tonkin decided to impose on the villages the constitution of paddy reserves, «proportional to the production, available on request and payable on delivery.»¹²

Whereas it strictly limited the free circulation of paddy and rice between and inside the different provinces of northern Vietnam, the administration forced each farmer to deliver a part of his harvest in proportion to the surface he cultivated. The owners of five *mâu*¹³ or less of rice land were thus required to sell to the government 20 kilograms per *mâu*; farmers who owned five to ten *mâu*, 80 kilograms per *mâu*; and those who owned over fifteen *mâu*, all their surplus. This ratio was increased in 1944: farmers who owned up to ten *mâu* were required to sell to the government 72 kilograms per *mâu*; those who owned from ten to fifteen *mâu*, 120 kilograms per *mâu*; and those who owned more than fifteen *mâu*, 200 kilograms.¹⁴ In that manner, Tonkin had to supply by way of compulsory deliveries 130,205 tons of rice in 1943, 186,130 tons in 1944.¹⁵

Those official requisitions of rice at an imposed price, meanwhile, did not take into account the rise of production costs. While the cost-of-living index had more than tripled from 1940 to 1943, the official purchase price offered to paddy producers was raised merely 25 % in 1943, after a single and slight increase in 1941.¹⁶ Those requisitions constituted therefore a crushing burden for the population who, in the occurrence of bad harvests, would be obliged to buy rice on the market at very much higher free prices, in order to be able to carry out the compulsory deliveries. Yet, the authorities did not seem to be aware of the harms the system was liable to bring forth. On the contrary, the Resident superior in Tonkin expressed on 13 May 1944 his satisfaction at the good disposition of the masses: «The notification of the next levy on the harvest of the fifth month has not roused any unfavourable reaction. There will of course be some trouble at the time of the delivery, albeit not very serious. The harvest promises to be average. I think I'll be able to obtain the expected 80,000 tons and to secure a sufficient supply for the second semester.»¹⁷

⁹ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, 14 PA, carton 1.

¹⁰ André Gaudel, *L'Indochine française en face du Japon* (Paris, 1947): 208-209.

¹¹ Admiral Decoux, *op. cit.*, p. 430.

¹² Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, 14 PA, carton 1, report dated on 7 January 1943.

¹³ One *mâu* equals 3600 square meters, or 0.36 hectare.

¹⁴ Huynh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945* (Ithaca, Cornell Univ. Press, 1982): 299.

¹⁵ *Etudes vietnamiennes* n° 24 (Hanoi, n.d.): 135.

¹⁶ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Affaires Economiques*, carton 14, telegram of 14 December 1943.

¹⁷ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, 14 PA, carton 1.

These unendurable compulsions notwithstanding, the condition of the rural population in northern Vietnam had grown more and more distressing; ever since the late thirties, the peasants of Tonkin had not ceased indeed to find themselves in a woeful plight.¹⁸ Long before the outbreak of the Pacific War, the agricultural economy of northern Vietnam already manifested grave symptoms of deterioration. Those were evinced at the same time by a diminution of the surface planted in rice and a decline of its production. As the second rice producing country of Indochina behind Cochinchina, Tonkin yielded during the period 1919-1922 2,100,000 tons of paddy in average per year for a tilled surface of 1,540,000 hectares.¹⁹ However, from 1930 onward, the amounts of production decreased regularly, dropping sharply in 1937 and after²⁰:

	<u>Surface of paddy-fields</u>	<u>Harvested paddy</u>
1937	1,230,666 hectares	1,604,297 tons
1938	1,372,505 --	1,953,447 --
1942	1,487,000 --	1,882,200 --
1943	1,386,000 --	1,762,000 --
1944	1,427,000 --	1,680,000 --

Excluding extraeconomic factors such as climatic accidents, this recession could be explained by a constant regression in productivity. Owing to the stagnation of agricultural technics, the output by the hectare receded from 13.6 quintals of paddy in 1930 to 13 in 1939 and 12 in 1944.²¹ Besides, the deficit of the agricultural yield tended to intensify the more so as the population of Tonkin increased steadily, growing at the yearly rate of 100,000 surplus births: the number of inhabitants of northern Vietnam augmented in this way from 8,700,000 in 1936 to 9,851,000 in 1944. Paddy production per head lessened therefore persistently in Tonkin, dropping to 190 kilograms in 1942, 180 kilograms in 1943 and 170 kilograms in 1944, whereas in Cochinchina it was three times higher: 590 kilograms, with a total production of 3,179,300 tons for a surface of 2,303,000 hectares during the 1942-43 season.²² Consequently, the average quantity of paddy necessary for the maintenance of a person, evaluated at 300-337 kilograms per year, was far from being reached. The agricultural production falling obviously behind the demographic growth, the population of Tonkin lived on the brink of starvation, in spite of complementary crops. It was indispensable to call upon rice from the South to ensure their subsistence.

The specter of famine was thus looming ominously. From 1936 to 1939, floods consecutive to the bursting of dikes occurred unceasingly, wrecking practically all of Tonkin in 1937. In late August of that year, inundated paddy-fields numbered 147,950 hectares in the provinces of Bac-ninh, Bac-giang, Hai-duong, Hung-yên, Ninh-binh, Son-tây, Phú-tho and Phúc-yên alone; the victims of the disaster added up to 732,000, among whom 300,000 completely stripped had to

¹⁸ See Nguyễn Thế Anh, «La campagne nord-vietnamienne de la dépression économique de 1930 à la famine de 1945», *Revue française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer* 274 (1987): 43-54.

¹⁹ J. Gauthier, *L'Indochine au travail dans la paix française* (Paris, 1949): 228.

²⁰ Sources: Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 471/4095; *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine*, op. cit.

²¹ Lê Châu, *op. cit.*, p. 153-155.

²² *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine*, op. cit., vol. 11, p. 87-88.

be totally assisted. Losses amounted to 10,990,000 Indochinese piastres. In only six districts of Bac-ninh province, about 150,000 famished peasants were reduced to beggary.²³

The Japanese occupation and the events connected with the war came to create conditions so adverse that they gave the finishing stroke to this exhausted economy. The reduction in production and the insufficiency of resources found expression in an increasingly unbalanced rice market, under the effect of speculation and price escalation. The action of the government in controlling prices most often amounted only to ratify rises that it could not prevent.²⁴ In fact, the excessive swelling of the fiduciary currency, from 235 million piastres on 1 January 1940 to more than 1,300 million on 1 January 1945, involved an outrageous raise of all the domestic prices.²⁵ Inflation made the cost of rice particularly prohibitive. On May 1941, the authorities were obliged to restrict the daily individual ration of rice to 750 grams; already considered as deficient, this quantity was cut down further to less than 500 grams in 1943. The extension of the black market came to impair the conjuncture: a quintal (100 kilograms) of rice that cost 30 piastres in 1940 was sold for 600 piastres in the beginning of 1945.

Moreover, the situation became complicated with the discontinuation of the supply of southern rice, which could no longer arrive regularly enough to help provide for the most pressing needs and bridge the gap while waiting for the next harvest. From 1942 onward, air bombings repeatedly inflicted heavy damages on public works, highways, railroads, bridges, and rolling-stock. In 1945, railway traffic was practically interrupted between Saigon and Hanoi, whereas 50 % of the road network were destroyed and 90 % of the motor vehicles had disappeared or were out of use. Sea transports were also victims of the military operations. The closing of the port of Haiphong, the destruction of the harbour installations of Tourane, the intensification of submarine warfare in the Gulf of Tonkin, then along the coasts of central Vietnam, progressively reduced the activity of the coasters, which could be plying first only between Saigon and Tourane, then only between Saigon and Qui-nhon, finally only between Saigon and Nha-trang.²⁶ Transportation difficulties prevented the distribution of products from one area to another, to such an extent that a very critical economic scission emerged between the North and the South. Tonkin ran utterly out of rice, while in Cochinchina huge quantities of it were stored without hope of being shifted and just spoiled away. By mid-October 1944, a part of the large stocks of rice that could not have been shipped to Japan had to be sold off very cheaply on the Saigon market-place. About 55,000 tons were thus offered to distilleries at a lower cost than the purchase price. At any rate, the price asked from the consumer for rice was, roughly speaking, forty times lower in Cochinchina than in Tonkin.

Under these conditions, dearth had been the lot of Tonkin since 1943. The food situation was brought next on the verge of disaster with the mediocrity of the 1943/1944 harvest. The crops of the fifth month of 1944 yielded only 655,000 tons of paddy, about 154,000 tons short of the harvest of the fifth month of 1942.²⁷ It appeared impossible for Tonkin left to itself to hold out until the harvest of the tenth month of 1944. Then, at the very moment when available resources

²³ Nguyễn Thế Anh, «La campagne nord-vietnamienne...», *art. cit.*, p. 51.

²⁴ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 471/4095.

²⁵ For more details on money circulation, inflation and indices of living cost, see Masaya Shiraishi, «Vietnam under the Japanese presence», *art. cit.*, p. 12-14.

²⁶ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 141/1267.

²⁷ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 141/1267.

were completely exhausted, typhoons followed by tidal waves of a rare violence swept down upon the country, flooding and destroying a large part of the autumnal rice crops. Famine was immediately rife. Hunger-stricken peasants started dying by the entire villages. The crisis was furthermore aggravated by a quasi-unprecedented long cold winter, which stopped the development of secondary crops and heightened if possible still the misery of the population. A newspaper reported in this manner the dreadful sight of the people's distress: «The constant state of heat loss is a factor of high mortality for the poor folks wrapped in miserable rags, in shreds of mats. To these people, the ever rising price of rice, the delay caused by the cold weather to the maturation of substitution farm products, would leave as food nothing but some vegetables, some weeds low in calories... They die slowly but surely of progressive malnutrition.»²⁸

As early as the Tết festival (lunar New Year) of the year *Ât-dâu* (1945), it appeared obvious that the extent of the disaster could in no way be circumscribed. Paul Beauchesne, the commercial director of the *Charbonnages du Tonkin*, wrote from Hon-gai on 12 October 1945 that the catastrophe was bound to happen irrevocably, even if the mistake had not been committed in imposing the rice requisitions so drastically in 1944. He deemed it probable that the people saved from hunger in February would have died anyway in May, as it was impossible to make up for the shortage estimated at 300,000 tons with importations from Cochinchina.²⁹

Anyway, through its exceptional magnitude, the great famine of the year *Ât-dâu* was to leave an indelible mark within the people's memory.³⁰ It was an atrocious calamity having occasioned, according to different estimates, from 1,500,000 to 2,000,000 victims between the fall of 1944 and the winter of 1945.³¹ It set in motion the procession of physical afflictions described in these hallucinating terms by a French witness in April 1945: «They [the country-people] move away in endless file by families, the aged, the children, the men, the women, bent under the weight of their misery, shivering all over their denuded skeletons, even with young girls at the very age when modesty allows no infraction, stopping from time to time either to close the eyes of one of theirs that has dropped to get up no more, or to strip him of some unnamable rag that, occasionally, still covers him. To behold these human forms more hideous than the ugliest of the animals, to behold these corpses curled up at the roadside, having as clothes and shrouds only some stalks of straw, one is ashamed of mankind.»³²

The provinces of Nam-dinh, Thái-bình, Hung-yên, Hà-nam and Ninh-bình were among the most affected. Out of 1,259,734 inhabitants that composed the population of the province of

²⁸ *L'Action*, 1 March 1945.

²⁹ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 338/2718.

³⁰ The terrible scenes generated by the sufferings of a population that deprivation drowned in the darkest despair will be haunting for a long time the creative imagination of writers. They provided Nguyễn Hồng with the theme of his two short stories *Địa ngục* and *Lò lửa* («The inferno» and «The furnace», 1945), or, fifteen years later, Nguyễn Công Hoan with the subject of his narratives *Tranh tối tranh sáng* («Penumbra», 1956), and *Hôn canh hôn cu* («Chaos», 1961).

³¹ The population of northern Vietnam would have dropped to less than 7,000,000 persons. The French authorities, however, contested those estimates, dwelling for their part on a more moderate figure of 700,000 deaths. They emphasized also that, by 9 March 1945, there was still enough rice to provide against famine; that the French administration was determined to deal severely with the traffickers, in view of restoring the concealed stocks to consumers and warding off the disaster of high-priced rice, but it was prevented by the Japanese coup from carrying out its plan (*Le Monde*, 8 March 1946).

³² Quoted by Lê Châu, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

Nam-dinh, the number of starvelings was estimated at 646,147 in April 1945.³³ Every day, it appeared, 3,154 persons on average died of hunger and cold during the winter of 1944-45 in the provinces of Nam-dinh and Thái-binh; by mid-April 1945, the total of the victims there might have reached the stunning figure of 467,000.³⁴ The dreadful disaster drove throngs of famished people to Hanoi and Hai-phong; in the capital of Tonkin, from fifty to seventy corpses crouching along the sidewalk would be picked up every day.

To come to the assistance of the needy, a First-Aid Committee of Tonkin (*Ban Cứu Tế Bac-ky*) was created on 22 January 1945. On 18 March 1945, the General Association of the Institutions of Social Assistance (*Tổng Hội Cứu Tế*) was formed to take in hand the direction of the combat against the growing distresses. The administration took a few measures: first, it relieved the ruined areas of rice requisition at imposed price, then moved to distribute food and clothes, and facilitated the purchase at low price of blankets and vests made of kapok. However, owing to the considerable mass of the dwellers of the Red River delta, the actions taken could reach but a small percentage of the population. It did not appear that the catastrophe could be checked that easily, especially as the problem of subsistence remained insoluble. As starvation had decimated the agricultural manpower, only 1,251,670 hectares of paddy-fields could be tilled for the season of the fifth month of 1945, against 1,414,444 hectares for 1944.³⁵

As it was, the Japanese coup of 9 March 1945 came about against a background of death and desolation. By means of the political confusion successive to the collapse of the French colonial regime, disorder spread, acts of banditry bred by the famine proliferated to a disquieting extent. The Japanese, who had replaced the French administration, incited aggressions against the French, accused of having deliberately starved the Vietnamese peasantry,³⁶ but they also lost control of the situation. The threat of death penalty decreed against speculators could make the price of the quintal of rice in Hanoi come down only temporarily, from 600 piastres to 440;³⁷ prices soared up again, nonetheless, in the beginning of April, to reach 800 piastres for 100 kilograms in the middle of May.³⁸ Other emergency measures were taken, without yielding expected results: creation of an Advisory Supply Committee in charge of studying the issue of provisions for the population of Tonkin, and proposing solutions fitted to relieve the most stricken areas and to regularize consumption in big cities; call upon the people to improve every plot of land apt to be cultivated with rice or food plants, in view of achieving «a rational increase of the productive capacity in the whole territory of Tonkin as to food crops.»³⁹

Installed on 17 April 1945 by the Japanese, the Trần Trọng Kim government pledged with courage in its first statements to attend foremost to the rice problem, so to solve a particularly thorny and critical matter, of vital importance for the population. Having gotten the

³³ *Tin Moi*, 28 April 1945.

³⁴ *Tin Moi*, 18 April 1945.

³⁵ *Tin Moi*, 30 June 1945.

³⁶ Cf. for example: Trần Văn Khu, «Hàng vạn dân quê bị chết đói và rét vì chính sách thực dân vô nhân đạo của Pháp» [Thousands of peasants died of hunger and cold because of the French's inhuman colonialist policy], *Tin Moi*, 17/18 April 1945; Nghiêm Xuân Yêm, «Nạn dân đói» [The scourge of famine], *Thanh Nghi*, 5 May 1945.

³⁷ *Tin Moi*, 17 March 1945.

³⁸ *Tin Moi*, 18 May 1945.

³⁹ *L'Action*, 3 May 1945.

Japanese authorities to give up the system of obligatory deliveries, it abrogated all the former stipulations concerning paddy and rice, and determined a new regulation aiming at preventing speculators from buying up the production, to counter thereby any artificial rise of prices. Free circulation of cereals was restored for quantities not exceeding 50 kilograms, so to expedite the provisioning of private individuals, but no company, no community beside the administration could buy rice or paddy directly from the producers. In every province, purchases indispensable to military needs and to general provisioning were to be effected exclusively by the agricultural banks, under the control and direction of the provincial chief, at prices varying between 100 and 130 piastres per quintal of paddy, and between 150 and 195 piastres per quintal of rice (except for the provinces of Thái-binh, Nam-dinh and Ninh-binh, where the highest price for a quintal of paddy could be raised to 150 piastres, and that for a quintal of rice to 225 piastres).⁴⁰ It was hoped that the situation of the farmers could improve thanks to this overhauling of the prices paid to the producers, now five times higher than under the former regime. Moreover, the decision decreed by the emperor Bao-Đai on 23 May 1945 to grant a moratory to debtors for agricultural loans worked toward the same end of bringing some relief to the small peasants.

It was necessary as well to attend first to the most pressing thing. Nguyễn Hữu Thi, the Equipment Minister, went to Saigon during the first fortnight of June to negotiate with the Japanese authorities in Cochinchina the modalities of rice transport from the South to the North, and of the immigration of one million needy from Bac-bô (Tonkin) and Trung-bô (Annam) into Nam-bô (Cochinchina). On the other hand, the government completed its measures of prevention against the famine with a decree passed on 30 July 1945, which set up a tax on expenses for entertainment and pleasure; its returns were to be assigned to relief work in Bac-bô. The government endeavoured also, through an active press campaign, to make public opinion sensitive to the misfortune of the northern fellow citizens. A veritable upsurge of national solidarity came into being, emerging through the creation in Huê of a Central Rescue Committee for the Needy of North Vietnam, and in Saigon of a Committee of Mutual Aid for the Victims of Bac-bô. Funds were raised, loads of collected rice were conveyed by junks and carts to Tourane or Faifo, and thence to the North.

Undoubtedly, these diverse measures, conjugated with a certain alleviation following the gathering of the fifth month crops, allowed the situation to return to normal, at least for some time. If lines of indigents, shorter though than before, were still forming at some points of free food distribution, the price of rice fell perceptibly: at mid-June, a quintal of rice cost no more than 260 piastres at the Hanoi market-place.⁴¹ This improvement was acknowledged by a French author, albeit with some resentment: «One witnesses the strengthening of the effort of the Annamese who continue, as they believe, to ensure by themselves, without the French and better than them, the provisioning of the northern provinces. The distribution of our stocks by the Japanese, the harvest of May 1945, as well as an intensification of the transports from the South to the North through brutal measures that we ourselves would not have ventured to take, bring a momentary abundance that explains that impression. The purpose is answered and the Annamese have come to think very seriously that they are ripe to be a great nation.»⁴²

⁴⁰ *Tin Moi*, 8 June 1945.

⁴¹ *Tin Moi*, 14 June 1945.

⁴² R. Bauchar, *Rafales sur l'Indochine* (Paris, 1946): 210.

The respite was only of short duration, however. The oncoming of the rainy season brought new anxieties. A Committee for the Protection and Supervision of Dikes was created; its task was to organize the defence of the dam network during the period of spate. As to exorcise bad fortune, an exhibition on dikes and their protection opened on 30 July at the Information Hall in Hanoi; there, the wish was expressed that, thanks to unrelenting vigilance, the dikes would be up to preserving the crops from the harms caused by floods.⁴³ It was to no avail: during the second fortnight of August, torrential rains poured down on the banks of the rivers that rose at once to reach on the twentieth the bench mark 12,68 in Hanoi, the highest ever known. With considerable breaches cutting into the dike network, the newly planted paddy fields in the provinces of Hà-dông, Bac-ninh, Son-tây, Phúc-yên, Vinh-yên, Hai-duong, Hà-nam and Thái-binh were submerged. On the whole, the catastrophe was to be extensive: flood covered 330,000 hectares of the tenth month rice, which would represent a loss amounting to 510,000 tons of paddy.⁴⁴ Prices rocketed anew, and famine immediately hit the population all over. In places, people found themselves constrained to consume seed rice, compromising thereby any chance of a late replanting in the eventuality of a fast ebbing of the water. A foreign observer described thus the situation towards the end of September 1945: «Hanoi with a population of 200,000 inhabitants is literally dying of hunger. Communication with the regions exporting food supply have not yet been restored, and the current rice harvest has been seriously damaged by the recent floods. Famine is affecting a very wide area. People are dying in the streets every day. The worst situation is that of the feeding of infants... Unless heroic measures be taken, famine at all ages and in all nationalities will reach a very high level in the region.»⁴⁵

Earlier, the clear awareness of its powerlessness had induced the Trần Trọng Kim cabinet, having little training in governmental tasks and seeing its legitimacy increasingly contested, to tender its resignation on 8 August 1945. Unrest was then at its highest pitch, as the different political groups had intensified their actions. Among them, the Việt Minh, in other words the Indochinese communist party, appeared as the best organized political force.

Since 1943, the main activities of the Việt Minh had consisted in mobilizing the peasants of the Red River delta against taxation, corvée, paddy requisitions and the forced cultivation of jute. Above all, the communists tried to derive from the famine arguments for their propaganda to acquire the support of the population of the countryside, to galvanize them and to direct them, with the rallying call «destroy the paddy granaries of the colonialists to avert the danger of famine», toward the preparation for the general uprising that would «liberate the country from the yoke of the French and Japanese imperialists.» After the Japanese coup of 9 March 1945, when they inventoried the «objective conditions» that the situation involved, the Việt Minh leaders reckoned the famine, a cause of the masses' hatred for the armies of occupation that seized upon rice for their exclusive use, as one of three «favourable opportunities (*thời cơ*)» for the organization of the period preliminary to the revolution, the other two being the political crisis binding the hands of the French and the Japanese, and the imminent landing of the Allied troops in Indochina with the Pacific war entering its final stage.⁴⁶ In that way, the communists gave the

⁴³ *L'Action*, 1 August 1945.

⁴⁴ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 338/2717.

⁴⁵ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Affaires Economiques*, carton 14.

⁴⁶ For details, see Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1976): 215-234; Huynh Kim Khanh, *op. cit.*, 302-315.

famine a leading part in their political strategy. Their campaign centred on the struggle against hunger allowed them to command a genuine mass movement, and accounted largely for the accession of the Việt Minh to power. The revolution of August 1945 had indeed matured among the wretched rural populations, long before the city dwellers perceived it. For this reason, it seemed to have followed in Tonkin the ideal pattern ascribed by the communists to the «general insurrection» that should spread first from villages to district then province towns, before reaching the big urban centres.

The Việt Minh seized power without much effort during the days following the surrender of Japan on 15 August 1945. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed on 2 September⁴⁷. For the new government, the subsistence issue constituted a decisive test: its credibility would depend on its capability in mastering the famine. It launched at once the slogans of its policy, «intensification of the production», «not a waste inch of land, not an idle arm», and engaged in an operation planned to achieve the development of food production. The famine was placed together with illiteracy and the foreign occupation among enemies that must be eliminated.

The question was effectively to outrun the French, who were preparing their reinstatement in Indochina with the help of British troops in charge of disarming the Japanese according to the Potsdam Agreement. Before the impending arrival of the French Far Eastern expeditionary corps, an active propaganda cast the responsibility of all the wrongs on the French administration: «More than two millions of our compatriots, even in the most productive areas, have died of hunger. After having mowed down two thirds of the population of Nam-dinh, Thái-binh, Hà-nam, Hai-duong, etc., the famine has shown its apparition in Annam and even in Cochinchina. Those who escaped from starvation are reduced to poverty, because the most scandalous speculation has been encouraged by the French administration: it was the first to have set the example of stockpiling and monopolizing. An unprecedented rise of prices has resulted, aggravated moreover by a policy of monetary inflation that ruins classes up to now relatively well-to-do.»⁴⁸

Very early therefore, a psychological warfare, with the famine as the principal theme, was combined with the resistance war that the Việt Minh made ready to wage against the French. The French, for their part, soon understood that they would succeed in reestablishing their control over the country only under the condition of ensuring a sufficient provisioning to its population. On 19 September 1945, general Leclerc, the commander-in-chief of the French troops in the Far East, transmitted to Paris this cablegram: «Wide publicity should be given to the catastrophic situation in Tonkin during our absence, disastrous floods owing to the bursting of the dikes not maintained by the Annamese in the absence of French technicians, disorder and banditry owing to the deficiency of the security service, depletion of the coffers of the Treasury, absence of the health service, prospect of a new famine. Need to insist on the famine question: that of the first semester of 1945 has caused two million victims and the Annamese revolutionary propaganda is trying to make us shoulder the responsibility for it. To do this, underline that: 1- As good rice consumers, the Japanese have besides speculated in that foodstuff and squandered the stocks indispensable to fill the gap. 2- The Japanese have diminished the surface of the paddy fields by

⁴⁷ See David G. Marr, «Hô Chí Minh's Independence Declaration», in K.W. Taylor & John K. Whitmore ed., *Essays into Vietnamese Past* (Ithaca, Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1995): 221-231.

⁴⁸ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 338/2717.

imposing instead cultivations necessary to their war effort, in particular castor-oil plant. 3- The harvest of the last months of 1944 was already 200,000 tons short. 4- Ousted, the French were never able to execute the projected relief programs, as they were replaced by incompetent Japanese or Annamese. Hence, the famine became tragic after the end of April. It is also necessary to say that the French government has taken measures to bring rice without delay to the populations of Tonkin that a new famine is endangering... In short, it is worth to broadcast whatever may militate in favour of our return in this country and help put a check on the propaganda of our enemies.»⁴⁹

How did the situation look toward the end of 1945? The Việt Minh asserted that, for the whole of the territory placed under the direct control of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the harvest of the winter of 1945 took place in good conditions, and that of the fifth month of 1946 obtained a clear-cut increase compared to the pre-war period. The augmented quantity of provisions, equivalent to 2,592,000 tons of basic food against 2,226,260 tons in the pre-war period, helped neutralize the famine. It is utterly impossible, apparently, to verify the reliability of these figures. It is not sure, nevertheless, that the triumph of the revolution over hunger would have been accomplished without the efforts made by the French to supply Tonkin with rice – about 20,000 tons monthly beginning with November 1945⁵⁰ –, since it was necessary on the other hand to feed a Chinese army of 180,000 troops assigned to the disarming of the Japanese North of the 16th parallel, and who, in addition, ransacked northern Vietnam, as if it were a conquered country, by taking to Nationalist China whatever they could carry off. In any case, if the food situation remained difficult, people no longer died of starvation in the spring of 1946.

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It would assuredly be a fundamental mistake to consider the famine of 1944-45 as the sole primordial factor that created the conditions of instability indispensable for the Vietnamese communists to place their revolutionary political structure in position. It is undeniable, however, that the repercussion of this catastrophe on the subsequent evolution of the events had been momentous. In another respect, fear of its recurrence had induced the Việt Minh leaders to cut back for the time being their policy of struggle against «feudalism». They would indeed have to wait until 1953 to begin enforcing the radical agrarian reform intended to lead to the building of socialism.

⁴⁹ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 125/1123.

⁵⁰ Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, *Indochine NF*, 158/1362.

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- *Bibliographie critique sur les relations entre le Viêt-Nam et l'Occident*. Paris, 1967.
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