

**Issues of Poverty and Poor Relief in Colonial Northern Vietnam:
The Interaction Between Colonial Modernism
and Elite Vietnamese Thinking**

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the discourses on poverty in Colonial Vietnam. Based on French-language archival material and Vietnamese-language literary and journalistic sources, the dissertation examines both the French colonial administration's and Vietnamese intellectuals' conceptualization and representation of poverty and poor relief. While both the French and Vietnamese discourses on poverty diverged in their analyses of the problem, they both vied for moral authority in the domain of poverty relief. This dissertation, therefore, contributes to the Postmodernist argument that poverty is a socially constructed concept, revealing more about the elite than the poor of whom they wrote.

Within the French colonial rhetoric one justification for colonial rule was the improvement of the material condition of Indochina. Poor relief fell within the purview of the French 'civilizing' mission, the official doctrine for French Imperialism. The colonial agenda, racial prejudices, and the French administrators' own ambivalent attitudes toward the poor made any attempt at poor relief doomed for failure. While poor relief functioned as a justification for the French presence in Indochina, when wielded by Vietnamese intellectuals the discourse on poverty became a rallying call for patriotism, nationalism, and for some, anti-colonialism. In the hands of the politically conservative intellectuals poverty became a problem connected with Vietnam's 'backward' culture and society. In the 1930s as the issue of poverty became more urgent, Vietnamese journalists and novelists began to explore critically the impact of poverty on their society. Literature of this period presented a compelling argument about the corrosive effect of poverty on Vietnamese society, and it subtly implicated French colonialism in the cause of poverty. By the late 1930s, left-wing writers took the discussion further to analyze the causes of poverty. Their writings left no doubt as to their conviction that colonialism and capitalism were responsible for the impoverishment of their society.

In examining the various competing discourses on poverty among elite Vietnamese writers, this dissertation shows the diversity among the elite as well as the intellectual dynamism of the period as Vietnamese intellectuals grappled with the global forces of colonialism and capitalism. While Vietnamese intellectuals exhibited a modernist faith that poverty could be eradicated, and thought of themselves as modern, their own idealized society, a *van minh* (civilized) society was based on Confucian values, such as social harmony and responsibility.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the late eighteenth century Samuel Johnson noted that a "decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization."¹ Echoing a similar view, an eminent Vietnamese historian, Dao Duy Anh, wrote in 1938 that social aid had become common practice in "civilized" (*van minh*) countries.² In all probability, what Dao Duy Anh meant by civilization differed somewhat from Samuel Johnson's conception. For many Vietnamese intellectuals of the late colonial period, being "civilized" entailed being a "strong, free, and independent nation-state."³ Moreover, it also assumed among other qualities, "mastery over nature, a spirit of civic responsibility, full development of the individual's mental, physical, and moral faculties, and the ability of Vietnamese to stand proud among other peoples of the world."⁴ The confluence of ideas on poor relief and civilization can be found in the practices and writings of the French colonial administration and the Northern Vietnamese intellectuals in the first four decades of the twentieth century.

This dissertation is a pioneering attempt at exploring the discourses⁵ on poverty and poor relief in Colonial Northern Vietnam. Treating poverty as a

¹ As quoted by Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984, p. 3.

² Dao Duy Anh, *Viet Nam van hoa su cuong* [A general history of Vietnamese culture], reprint, first published in 1938. Saigon: Xuat Ban Bon Phuong, n. d., p. 163.

³ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981, p. 138.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ I am using the term discourse in the Foucaultian sense. According to Colin Gordon, Foucault developed the concept of discourse for the purpose of analyzing the role of knowledge in the exercise of power. In this context, discourses are "identifiable collections of utterances governed by rules of construction and evaluation which determine within some thematic area what may be

socially constructed idea, this dissertation argues that poor relief was a domain where French colonialists and Vietnamese intellectuals vied for moral authority. Within the French colonial rhetoric one justification for colonial rule was the improvement of the material condition of the peoples of Indochina. Poor relief fell within the purview of the French '*mission civilisatrice*' (civilizing mission). This expression, which gained prominence in the 1870s and remained so throughout the first half of the twentieth century, claimed among other things, that French colonization was bringing moral and material progress to the colonies.⁶ Attaining a 'civilized' status was also a major preoccupation for many Northern Vietnamese intellectuals; but for them, civilization also held a promise of independence. Thus, as this dissertation will show, the Vietnamese discourse on poverty was intimately tied to the search for a strong and independent nation. This can be called a modernist perspective: the belief not just that poverty was a largely social problem that needed to be solved through government or elite intervention, but that it also was the symptom of a crisis in a specifically national community.

While poor relief functioned as a justification for the French presence in Indochina, when wielded by Vietnamese intellectuals the discourse on poverty became a rallying call for patriotism, nationalism and for some, anti-colonialism. In the hands of the politically conservative intellectuals and advocates of collaboration with colonial rulers in Northern Vietnam, poverty became a

said, by whom, in what context, and with what effect." Colin Gordon, "Introduction", in James D. Faubion, ed., *Power: Essential Works of Foucault*. New York: The New Press, 2000, p. xvi.

⁶ Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 52-53.

problem connected with Vietnam's 'backward' culture and society. For this group solving the problem of poverty required a thorough transformation of Vietnam into a modern society. In the 1930s and 1940s the issue of poor relief became even more pertinent and urgent. During this period journalists and novelists of diverse political commitment began to explore critically the impact of poverty on their society. Literature of this period presented a compelling argument about the corrosive effect of poverty on Vietnamese society. By the late thirties, left-wing writers took the discussion further to analyze the causes of poverty. Their work left no doubt as to their conviction that colonialism and capitalism were responsible for the impoverishment of their society.

Although they differed in their perceptions of poverty, Northern Vietnamese intellectuals of various political tendencies saw themselves as the appropriate candidates for guiding the masses out of poverty. While issues relating to poverty and poor relief might have appeared apolitical, they in fact touched on all aspects of colonial life: the political, social, economic, moral, and spiritual. It was in this realm--in the discourse on poverty and poor relief--that Vietnamese intellectuals attempted to assert their moral authority by linking the problem of poverty to the national issue of independence and survival. It was also in this realm that Vietnamese intellectuals endeavoured to grapple with the immense disruption in their worldview, to negotiate between the old and new cultural values, and to begin defining their own cultural identity.

Sources and Method Notes

One of my main primary sources is the official documentation from the office of the Resident Superior of Tonkin. Vietnam's National Archive Number One, located in Hanoi, holds the bulk of this material. Since the 1990s, as a result of the Vietnamese State's *Doi Moi* (Renovation) policies, foreign researchers have been given relatively more and better access to the archives of Vietnam than before. Another important source for this dissertation is the Vietnamese-language newspapers and literature preserved in the libraries of Vietnam and in North America. This material provides a counterpoint to the French colonial administrators' perceptions with those of the Vietnamese intellectuals.

My original decision to focus on Northern Vietnam was based on an essentialist assumption about culture. When I began my research plan, I wanted to immerse myself in the North, the place where the culture of the Viet (or *Kinh*) ethnic group first emerged and developed. Perceiving the North as 'the' cradle of Vietnamese civilization, I wanted to focus where Vietnamese culture was its 'purest'. Needless to say, I have changed my view of the existence of a singular narrative of Vietnamese history, of one moving linearly from North to South. I have, however, maintained a focus on the North for two reasons. The first reason was out of practical consideration of the availability of time. The historical experiences of these three regions created diversity in the intellectual milieu and discourses. With the time I had, I did not feel that I could treat all three regions with the depth that was required. The second reason was an intellectual one. With regard to elite discourses on poverty, the North was the obvious place to begin. The image of a poor 'Tonkinese' peasant, trying in vain to subsist on a tiny plot of land in the overcrowded Red River Delta was strong and pervasive in writings on poverty. Notwithstanding the fact that famine

and disasters occurred in Central and Southern Vietnam, and that a great proportion of Southern Vietnamese peasants were without land, Northern poverty remained a preoccupation among French administrators as well as among the Vietnamese elite.

During the French colonial period (1862-1945) Northern Vietnam was known as Tonkin, a protectorate in the Union of Indochina, which also included the colony of Cochin China (Southern Vietnam), the protectorates of Annam (Central Vietnam), Cambodia, and Laos. In 1900 a small region on the coast of Southern China, the territory of Kouang-Tchéou-Wan, was added to Indochina. During most of the period under discussion Northern Vietnam encompassed all the provinces north of Thanh Hoa. The cultural and historical diversities that existed between the northern and southern parts of Vietnam were accentuated and reinforced by the colonial political division of the country into three regions each with its own administration. Northern and Central Vietnam were under the purview of their respective Resident Superiors, while Southern Vietnam was controlled by the Governor of Cochin China. All three regions in turn answered to the Governor General of Indochina, who tried to spend equal time in Hanoi and Saigon. As of 1931 Northern Vietnam was divided into twenty-one provinces and four military territories.⁷ Each province was under the administrative control of a French Resident, while each of the military territories was administered by a military commander.

In French colonial documents and publications, the word "Annamite" was often used as a general term to refer to all the peoples of all three regions of

⁷ The provinces of Tonkin or Northern Vietnam were: Bac Giang, Bac Kan, Bac Ninh, Ha Dong, Hai Duong, Hoa Binh, Hung Yen, Kien An, Lang-son, Lao Kay, Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, Phu Tho, Quang Yen, Son La, Son Tay, Thai Nguyen, Tuyen Quang, Vinh Yen, and Yen Bay. The four military territories were: Hai Ninh, Cao Bang, Ha Giang, and Lai Chau. Eugène Teston and Maurice Percheron, *L'Indochine moderne: Encyclopédia administrative, touristique, artistique et économique*. Paris: Librairie de France, 1931, p. 82.

Vietnam (Northern, Central and Southern). With regard to ethnic groupings, however, this term was used specifically for the *Kinh* (or Viet) ethnic group, which represented (during the colonial period) about eighty-four percent of the population.⁸ In this dissertation I use the term "Vietnamese" in place of "Annamite". For the most part, the Vietnamese writers examined in this dissertation, if not of the *Kinh* ethnic group, were *Kinh* culturally and socially. In their writings, references to Vietnamese history, Vietnamese culture, and Vietnamese tradition were mainly those of the *Kinh* people. Generally, the *Kinh* tended to be found in the lowlands, pursuing wet-rice cultivation and/or fishing. In other words, this dissertation speaks mainly of and about the experiences and perceptions of the *Kinh* ethnic group.

Moreover, the Vietnamese or *Kinh* elite examined here were predominantly middle to upper class, educated people living in towns and cities. Throughout the dissertation I use the terms elite, intellectual, and intelligentsia. I use the terms Vietnamese elite and elite Vietnamese as a broad category of privileged people, including dignitaries, colonial and court officials, intellectuals and intelligentsia, of all political views. The intellectuals are those thinkers and writers of various calibre and again of various political tendencies, including such diverse individuals as Pham Quynh and Nguyen Cong Hoan. The terms intelligentsia will be used for more politically active and explicitly nationalist members of the intellectual elite, such as Nhat Linh, Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap.

As a group, the Vietnamese intellectuals examined in this dissertation represent a tiny portion of the society. It is their perceptions and articulations of poverty and poor relief that I am exploring. Whether or not their views reflected

⁸ Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of Indochina*. First published in French in 1939. English edition translated by Isabel Ward. London: Oxford University Press, 1944, p. 48.

the sentiments of the rest of the population, or even the Vietnamese intellectual elites in Central and Southern Vietnam, is undisputedly an important question, but it is one that is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Chapter Two will provide more explanations and establish the theoretical bases and scope of this dissertation.

Chapter 2: Historiography and Theoretical Framework

Historiography of Vietnam

Beyond War

Vietnam--America's *Heart of Darkness*, burdened with similarly complex issues related to colonization as revealed by Joseph Conrad's novel--has become for North America more of an allegory than an actual geographical location. The Vietnam War traumatized the American psyche and society, though less brutally and violently than the effect it had on the Vietnamese people and environment. Preoccupation with the Vietnam War among North American academics, journalists, and the reading public produced from the 1960s onward an industry of writings on the "Vietnamese conflict".¹ By the early 1990s, however, the topic of economic development in Vietnam became popular, competing with the war as a subject of inquiry. Slowly, energy shifted from explaining how/why the United States lost the Vietnam War to revealing how capitalism is "defeating" communism.² Thus Vietnam as an allegory of America's moral authority and military might in crisis was replaced by Vietnam as the symbol for the triumph of liberalization and the market economy.

Counteracting the reductionist tendency to equate Vietnam with war, a small group of area specialists beginning in the early 1970s attempted to expand the scope of inquiry, situating Vietnam within its own history. Among those pioneering such an attempt were historians Alexander Woodside, David Marr, and William Duiker. Their writings on Vietnam's nineteenth-century and early

¹ See the various bibliographies devoted exclusively to the literature on the war: Richard Burns and Milton Leitenberg, *The Wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, 1945-1982: a Bibliographic Guide*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clio, 1984; Sandra Wittman, *Writing about Vietnam: a Bibliography of the Literature of the Vietnam Conflict*. Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall, 1989.

² A notable exception in this trend is *Vietnam's Rural Transformation*, edited by Ben Kerkviet and Doug Porter (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), which examines the "counter-revolutionary" effects of the free market economy on the poor, peasants, women and social welfare.

twentieth-century history shifted the focus from the American-Vietnam War and made an argument for a history of Vietnam in its own right. The writings of these historians shed light on the intellectual and cultural predicament of Vietnamese society in pre-colonial and colonial periods.

With a focus on the elite and the intelligentsia, Woodside and Marr explore the themes of continuity versus discontinuity in intellectual history. Woodside's *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* is a study of government structures in early nineteenth-century Vietnam, prior to the French conquest.³ It examines the limitations and difficulties in the Nguyen kings' attempts to borrow Confucian political theories and institutional apparatus from China. Woodside argues that without support from the wider community, and without China's wealth, size, and diversity, Vietnamese Confucian philosophy became ossified while its bureaucracy and institutions became inflexible. Because it was a top-down imposition of orthodoxy, any perceived deviation was not tolerated. Woodside points to the restriction placed on cultural practices such as the village operas and dramas that had Cham rather than Chinese influence.⁴ Such rigidity in state-sponsored political and cultural philosophy also meant that any opposition had little room to maneuver; thus, disaffected Vietnamese scholars were more 'troublesome' and rebellious than their Chinese counterparts.⁵

The lack of intellectual and cultural vigor in the state orthodoxy continued to be a problem for the early twentieth-century Vietnamese intelligentsia in their opposition to French colonialism. In *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, Woodside suggests that French conquest of Vietnam revealed as well as intensified the fragmentation and lack of collective organization in

³ Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988 (Reprint, first published in 1971).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 228-232.

Vietnamese society. Among the Vietnamese intelligentsia in the twentieth century was the imperative of building "more effective 'organized communities' and 'organized groups' (*doan the*)."⁶ The task of building an "organized community" in colonial Vietnam was immense, since French colonialism destroyed much of the former symbolism (however inadequate) used by the Vietnamese Confucian elite for national integration. Woodside suggests that vestiges of the "fossilized debased Confucian social philosophies"⁷ still played an important part in foiling the intelligentsia's community-building attempts and exacerbating fragmentation.

William Duiker's study of the emergence of Vietnamese nationalism also supports the notion of continuity in understanding Vietnamese modern history.⁸ Arguing for the existence of a protonationalist consciousness in "traditional" Vietnam, Duiker contends that the modern nationalist movement in early twentieth-century Vietnam "did not represent a complete break with the past."⁹ According to Duiker, the non-communist modern nationalists were unable to organize mass nationalist movement in contrast to other Asian colonies, such as India and Indonesia, because of the Vietnamese nationalists' own alienation from each other and from the peasants. More importantly, Duiker argues that with Confucianism thoroughly discredited, the Vietnamese nationalists lacked a unifying ideology, such as Hinduism and Islam, to attract a mass following.¹⁰ This nationalist failure also explains the success of the Indochinese Communist Party in attracting support.

⁶ Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976, p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁸ William Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

David Marr's two volumes on the Vietnamese anti-colonial nationalists, however, emphasize the discontinuity in Vietnam's economic, social, and intellectual history under French colonialism. Marr argues that the political, economic, and social disruptions of colonialism paved the way for a fundamental change in Vietnamese political and social consciousness. In *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, Marr states that in the interwar period Indochina became a classic colony, "her every economic fiber attuned to the demands of financial and industrial interests in France."¹¹ These dramatic socio-economic changes in the case of Northern Vietnam spawned a small native petit bourgeoisie that was "deeply wounded" by colonial injustice and humiliation.¹² From the mid-1920s onward, Vietnamese society experienced "profound economic and social change."¹³ The modern printing press, the new national language (*quoc ngu*), as well as an increase in exposure to Western cultural and intellectual influences were making an impact on Vietnamese society. Marr continues to argue that simultaneous with the socio-economic ruptures was the introduction and acceptance of new ideas regarding social organization. New concepts such as Fatherland (*to quoc*), countrymen (*dong bao*), and citizen (*quoc dan*) became a permanent part of the Vietnamese vocabulary.¹⁴

In this argument Marr is supported by historian Greg Lockhart, whose research on the People's Army of Vietnam contends that a profound intellectual shift took place in the early twentieth century, paving the way for the creation of a modern army.¹⁵ Lockhart argues that prior to French colonization

¹¹ David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1855-1925*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, p. 261.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 263.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁵ Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms: The Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam*. Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1989.

[loyalty] to the monarch was ... inseparable from loyalty to the country, and these two loyalties were the foundation for Vietnamese political unity because they transcended regional loyalties and made the country, collectively, Vietnamese.¹⁶

As French conquest stripped away the importance of the king, the anti-colonial intelligentsia had to articulate a new formation of the nation, focusing on the people (*dan*) as the foundation as opposed to the king. Lockhart writes, "Vietnamese 'people' was being placed in such a new light that they became the foundation for the entirely new political category of 'nation'."¹⁷ As early as 1910, according to Lockhart, anti-colonialist scholars such as Phan Boi Chau were attempting to bring together the "categories of country, community, and race... without the monarch."¹⁸ In other words, there was an endeavour to conflate "the modern sense of national solidarity and ancient universal idealism."¹⁹

In other works, Lockhart examines the dramatic changes among Vietnamese writers in their literary construction of self and society in the 1930s. In the introductory essay for the translations of three modern Vietnamese literary works, Lockhart suggests that the emergence of documentary reportage writing and autobiographies, with self-reflexive and democratic impulses, marked a major transformation among intellectuals in their perception of social relationship.²⁰ In other words, the social realism of literary and journalist accounts of the 1930s was part of an emerging national consciousness among the intellectual class. According to Lockhart, Tam Lang, author of *Toi keo xe* (I pull a rickshaw) endeavoured to imagine a new collective identity, one that was

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Greg Lockhart, Introduction, *The Light of the Capital*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996.

national and democratic, by using the first person active pronoun in his reportage.²¹

The issue of how different cultures interact, particularly in colonial and postcolonial settings where power differences exist, continues to attract scholarly attention. Vietnam had prided itself on being able to borrow from China without losing its 'essence'-- its national soul. It is a difficult task, therefore, to untangle various strands of foreign influences in order to make a definitive argument about how much of the 'modern' Vietnamese view was old and how much was new. Notwithstanding the problem of whose view one considers representative of Vietnam as a whole, there is also the problem of how Vietnamese intellectuals understood and interpreted 'modern' Western ideas and institutions. As a later section in this chapter will illustrate, there are convincing arguments from theorists of postcolonial literature for cultural *métissage*—for non-Manichean ways to understand cultural interaction.

Regional Diversity

French colonialism began in the South in 1862, establishing the colony of Cochinchina. In the 1880s French encroachment upon the rest of Vietnam resulted in the creation of the Protectorates of Annam and Tonkin. The different colonial policies pursued in the three regions of Vietnam reflected the diverse socio-cultural make-up of these regions, particularly between the North and South, at the same time reinforcing their differences. A contrast has often been made between the North's monocultural orthodoxy and the South's multicultural heterodoxy. It was only in the mid-1600s that the Vietnamese (more specifically, the *Kinh* ethnic group) began to settle in the South. As Li Tana shows, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Nguyen lords

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

established a separate 'rebel' state in opposition to the more traditionalist Confucian-influenced Le-Trinh rulers of the North.²² Unrestrained by Confucian morality, the Nguyen rulers explored alternative models of self-construction and representation, outside of the Confucian framework. The work of Li Tana, along with others such as Keith Taylor, are challenging the conventional presentation of Vietnamese history as a single coherent narrative dominated by the themes of national unity and heroic resistance to foreign domination.²³

Hue-Tam Ho Tai suggests that by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the South's ethnic and religious diversity and lack of village cohesion, in comparison to the North and Centre, made it less resilient to the social disruption of French colonialism.²⁴ Both Tai and Jayne Werner show in their respective books that the heterogeneity of the South made it conducive to sectarian and millenarian movements, such as the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao.²⁵ As responses to social and economic disruption of French colonialism, the Cao Dai sect was, and continues to be, an amalgamation of heterogeneous Western and Eastern influences, while the Hoa Hao was built upon a Buddhist folk religious movement that rejected secular and religious hierarchies.²⁶

It was not coincidental that the leading figure of radicalism in the 1920s was a Southerner, who spearheaded the search for individual liberation alongside national independence. This iconoclastic radical leader, Nguyen An

²² Li Tana, "An Alternative Vietnam: The Nguyen Kingdom in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 29, 1 (March 1998), pp. 111-121.

²³ K. W. Taylor, "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 57, 4 (1998), pp. 949-978; See also articles in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, edited by K. W. Taylor and John Whitmore. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.

²⁴ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 8.

²⁵ Jayne Werner, *Peasant Politics and Religious Sectarianism: Peasant and Priest in the Cao Dai in Vietnam*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981; Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*.

²⁶ Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics*, pp. 87-88.

Ninh, was the subject of Hue Tam Ho Tai's *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*.²⁷ In examining the radical movement of the 1920s, Tai provides a sketch of the different political cultures that existed in Northern and Southern Vietnam as a result of both historical development and of French colonial policy. In the South, for instance, there was a large native bourgeoisie that dominated colonial politics, whereas in the North neo-traditional conservatives continued to be influential. The Northern anti-colonial intelligentsia had to contend with not only the French colonial rulers but also Vietnamese conservative elements. Tai shows that even though the iconoclasm of the Northern *Tu Luc Van Doan* (the Self-Reliance Literary Group) was much tamer than that of Southern radicalism, the group still created controversy in advocating personal happiness over familial harmony.²⁸

Another difference often cited between the North and South concerns the economy. French colonial writings advanced a perception that life in the North was more difficult, a consequence of the high population density, harsh climate, exhausted soil, and an undeveloped economy dependent on rice cultivation. Charles Robequain, for example, was typical in his emphasis of the North's "overpopulation" and its connection with poverty.²⁹ In 1939 Robequain (member of the *École Française d'Extrême Orient* and professor at the *Collège de France*)³⁰ wrote that in general, "the intense overcrowding diminishes from north to south" with lower Tonkin supporting an average population density of 450

²⁷ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

²⁹ Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indochina*. London: Oxford University Press, 1944.

³⁰ John Kleinen, "the Village as Pretext: Ethnographic Praxis and the Colonial State in Vietnam", in Jan Breman *et. al.*, eds., *The Village in Asia Revisited*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 367.

people per square kilometer.³¹ In contrast, in "no province of Cochin China does the rural population density rise to 200 per square kilometer."³² Robequain linked the high population density in the North to the fragmentation of land holdings and impoverishment of the peasants. He wrote:

While poverty among the natives is less widespread than formerly, it has by no means disappeared. The visitor to the northern deltas sees woeful evidences of it. Particularly if he leaves the highways and wanders into the swarming market places and penetrates into the intimacy of villages hidden behind tall bamboo hedges, he no longer wants to boast...of the riches of the Annamite plains.³³

According to Robequain, overpopulation also depleted the village's welfare system: "population increases and the weakening structure of communal life have often ruined this valuable custom of mutual aid."³⁴ Later he reiterated: "overpopulation is the fundamental problem; the one on whose solution depend all the others."³⁵ Robequain was not unique in his insistence of overpopulation as a problem. In the 1930s the issue of 'surplus' population in the Northern Red River Delta received more than its share of attention.³⁶ This was the case, even though, as Andrew Hardy suggests, there was much doubt among colonial administrators and academics about the accuracy of demographic data. In 1942 the head of the Indochina General Statistical Services, for example, voiced his concerns about how unreliable data on population and agricultural production were.³⁷

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

³⁶ Andrew Hardy, *A History of Migration to Upland Areas in 20th Century Vietnam*. PhD Dissertation, The Australian National University, 1998, p. 83.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

Emphasizing population density was convenient, for it allowed the colonial administration to evade its contribution to the impoverishment of Indochina. Poverty was also a problem in the South, as Pierre Gourou's research on the tenant farmers and labourers in the South demonstrates.³⁸ Overpopulation could not be used to explain people's miseries there. Capitalist encroachment on South Vietnam began earlier and more intensely than it did in the North. As a result, land accumulation and the rate of 'proletarianization' was much higher in the South than in the other regions of Vietnam. Martin Murray, citing data collected by Yves Henry, notes that only one family out of four owned some land in the South.³⁹ Colonial attention, however, was more focused on the crowded Red River delta, since the solutions were in line with the colonial agenda. State-directed migration to settle frontier lands or to work in Southern plantations was often presented as the panacea for poverty alleviation. These inadequate relief measures were preferable, from the administration's point of view, to tackling land reform or reducing the tax burden on the poor. As this dissertation will show, the ubiquitous image of the poor 'Tonkinese' peasant was also popular among Northern Vietnamese intellectuals in voicing their political discontent.

Village Life Under Colonialism

Villages of Vietnam are also being understood in their diversities. Vietnamese historians have made concerted effort to change the perception that 'the' Vietnamese village was a closed corporate unit, protected by a thick bamboo

³⁸ Pierre Gourou showed that on average a labouring household spent seventy-one percent of its income on food, while a tenant farmer working five hectares could not earn enough to live. *Land Utilization in French Indochina*, Part III. Paris: Centre d'études de politique étrangère, Publication No. 14, 1945.

³⁹ Martin Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, pp. 428-429.

hedge. In a state-of-the field article, Vietnamese village specialist Phan Dai Doan concedes that little is known about Vietnamese villages of the past.⁴⁰ Doan points to the diversity that existed among villages as reaffirmation that the image of a 'typical' village was generally pertinent only for the North. Southern villages were established later than those in the North and were generally more open and loose in structure.⁴¹ Anthropologist Hy Van Luong's *Revolution in the Village* makes the solid case for the need to study villages within their specific cultural, socio-political framework.⁴² In Luong's case-study village of Son Duong in the Red River Delta, revolutionary spirits and actions were fully integrated, maintained, and nurtured within a kinship-centred hierarchical social structure, which embodied dialectical ideals of inequality as well as communalism. Luong's argument poses a serious challenge to class-based analysis, such as Martin Murray's as well as Samuel Popkin's political-economy approach to understanding rural Vietnam.⁴³

In view of the sketchy understanding historians have for the vast variety of villages in colonial Vietnam, one can conclude that it would be difficult to generalize about the experience of peasants, particularly poor ones, under French colonial rule. The consensus among historians of Vietnam is that French rule greatly impoverished the rural population, seventy percent of which in the 1930s were poor peasants, tenant farmers, and agricultural labourers.⁴⁴ According to David Marr, French colonialism prior to World War One brought

⁴⁰ Phan Dai Doan, "may van de ve lang xa Viet Nam", [Some issues regarding Vietnamese villages], *Nghien cuu lich su* [Historical Research], 1, 232-233 (January-February 1987), pp. 7-15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴² Hy Van Luong, *Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992.

⁴³ Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina*; Samuel Popkin, *The Rational Peasant. The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.

⁴⁴ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, pp. 27-28.

three major changes to the lives of ordinary Vietnamese.⁴⁵ The first was the efficient and thorough intrusion of state control into the local levels, much more so than Vietnamese monarchs had been able to do. The second was the introduction of private property, which led to the large accumulation of land by the wealthy and the increasing dispossession of land among the poor. The last was the penetration of the cash economy in commercial exchanges and in the tax system.

Historians Pham Cao Duong and Ngo Vinh Long have both provided the standard texts for the 'immiseration' of the Vietnamese peasantry during the French colonial period. Relying heavily on the findings of colonial geographers, ethnographers, and economists, such as Pierre Gourou and Yves Henry, Pham Cao Duong's 1967 book paints a grim picture of the peasantry under colonial rule. He presents a sketch of the 'precolonial' period, in which efforts were made by Vietnamese kings to provide for the people as a contrast to the harsh colonial days.⁴⁶ Ngo Vinh Long presents a similar portrait in *Before the Revolution*.⁴⁷ In addition to relying on French colonial data, Long also uses Vietnamese fiction of the 1930s and 1940s. Long's translations of excerpts of Vietnamese literature are meant to give readers a glimpse of colonial reality particularly from a poor peasant's perspective. The literary material complements the findings that both Duong and Long present, and provides a vivid illustration of the hardship and exploitation peasants suffered at the hands of the wealthy village bullies and the colonial rulers.

Both Duong and Long, however, present their statistical and literary sources as an accurate reflection of reality as opposed to part of an elite

⁴⁵ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, pp. 4-5.

⁴⁶ Pham Cao Duong, *Vietnamese Peasants under French Domination*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1985. The original Vietnamese edition, *Thuc trang cua gioi nong dan Viet Nam duoi thoi Phap thuoc*, was published in 1967.

⁴⁷ Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution*. Cambridge: MIT press, 1973.

discourse on poverty that might shed more light on the elite who produced the knowledge than the subject itself. The limitation of colonial knowledge about rural Vietnam has been noted by John Kleinen, whose review article on French and Vietnamese cultural anthropologists and rural sociologists of the colonial period examines the socio-political context in which much of the rural research was conducted.⁴⁸ Kleinen points out that Pierre Gourou's *Les Paysans du delta tonkinois*, "a landmark of rural sociology...is probably the most quoted work by contemporary scholars of Vietnam."⁴⁹ Although Kleinen seems more concerned about the use of research such as Gourou's in the attempt to understand present-day rural Vietnam, his caution is also appropriate for its use in writings about the past. For example, although Gourou's work was not commissioned by the colonial government, the "dividing line between these studies and those written on contract remained quite thin."⁵⁰ Furthermore, Gourou never directly criticized the colonial government, and the "causes of poverty and misery are...seldom attributed to colonial policies."⁵¹ Kleinen shows that the beginning of Vietnamese ethnography had its root deep in colonial institutions, with Vietnamese researchers being trained by French scholars. Consequently, early Vietnamese ethnography shared basic colonial assumptions about Vietnamese villages, such as their static nature, and also helped to "reify elements of 'the Vietnamese village'".⁵²

This dissertation approaches the French and Vietnamese elite's writings on poverty as discourses revealing insights into the elite's preoccupation and agenda rather than as glimpses into reality. Although there is little doubt that

⁴⁸ John Kleinen, "The Village as Pretext".

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 384.

ordinary people suffered from colonial rule, becoming more vulnerable to economic instability, the focus of this dissertation is on the elite and its treatment and representation of this problem.

Poverty in Western European Historiography

In contrast to Vietnamese historiography, where there has not yet been any study devoted to the intellectual history of poverty, there is for European historiography a sizable body of literature that examines the intellectual and social history of poverty and poor relief. In general, the various historical studies on poverty in Europe focus on changes in attitudes toward the poor, the meanings of poverty, the treatments of the poor, and the level of state intervention in poor relief.

There is a consensus among historians that the definitions and categorizations of poverty changed over time depending on the socio-economic, religious, and political climate, and thus the nature of and attitude toward poverty relief also changed. Stuart Woolf wrote:

Concepts of poverty have shifted far more than the composition of the poor over the centuries, even since the early modern period. They are revealing indicators of the deeper values and often irrational motivations underlying both popular and elite attitudes.⁵³

According to Woolf, by the late Middle Ages the vocabulary of poverty still remained ambivalent,

oscillating ambiguously between religious merit and physical disgust, between moral concern for the victims of the uncertainties of life or fate and growing hostility to the potential menace represented by beggars and vagrants.⁵⁴

⁵³ Stuart Woolf, *The Poor in Western Europe*. London: Methuen, 1986, p. 17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Similarly, Gertrude Himmelfarb's writing shows that attitudes toward the poor in nineteenth-century England swung from repressive to sympathetic.⁵⁵

Himmelfarb argues against the idea that there was a linear development toward a more liberal and compassionate view of poverty.

Writings on European history also reveal the multiple levels of meanings the word "poverty" connoted for their contemporary societies. Robert Jutte's work, for example, shows that in the early modern period the word "poor" did not only mean the opposite of "rich" or "wealthy", but carried with it connotations of the person's social relationship, circumstances, and character. In other words, it was "evaluative, saying that a person is such or so circumstanced, as to excite one's compassion or contempt."⁵⁶ In his examination of the role poverty played in Christian theology in the Middle Ages, Bronislaw Geremek reveals that poverty's function was to provide opportunities for the non-poor to achieve salvation through charity.⁵⁷ By the sixteenth century, however, economic disruptions produced increasing numbers of poor people to the point that it became a "social problem". Geremek states:

Now, as the huge mass of beggars and unemployed began to impinge on the collective consciousness, poverty came to be perceived as harmful to the public good, and was divested of its previous function.⁵⁸

With the new perception that poverty was a problem and not a fact of life, governments began to be involved in categorizing the poor and organizing poor relief. It became important to the various European societies at large that distinctions between 'deserving' and 'non-deserving' (the 'true' and 'idle') were

⁵⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Robert Jutte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 9.

⁵⁷ Bronislaw Geremek, *Poverty: A History*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, p. 102.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

made and that assistance was given only to the former category. In general, the early modern period saw the enlargement of the secular state's role in poor relief, increasing rationalization, bureaucratization, and professionalization of relief work and the importance placed on education and training in helping the poor.⁵⁹ By the seventeenth century it was conventional belief that confinement and hard work, which would instill discipline and good work ethics in the poor, were appropriate responses to the rising numbers of vagrants and beggars. Therefore, institutions to house and confine the 'idle' poor were established throughout Europe during this time.⁶⁰

Scholarship on eighteenth-century French history focuses on the rise of the humanitarian ideals of the Enlightenment in relation to issues of poverty and poor relief.⁶¹ Olwen Hufton shows that although in the eighteenth century there was an increasing level of centralization in relief activities, such as the establishment of the *atelier de charité* (1770s) and the *Comité de Mendicité* (1790), much of the relief provision was still based on private and voluntary donations.⁶² According to Hufton, the growth in humanitarian thinking had less to do with the change in the government's increasing involvement in poverty relief than the fact that there was an alarming increase in the number of visible destitute and poor people, making local and religious-based charities inadequate.⁶³

Despite the lofty ideals of the French Revolution in regard to eradicating poverty, in practice the remedies fell quite short of addressing the needs of the poor. Alan Forrest contends that although French Revolutionaries believed in

⁵⁹ Jutte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 101-104.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 169-175; Woolf, *The Poor in Western Europe*, p. 27.

⁶¹ Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth Century France*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974; Alan Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981.

⁶² Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth Century France*, pp. 133 and 182.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 176.

the notion of *le droit à la subsistance*--that every person had a right to feed and clothe themselves--prevalent also was the belief that too much charity would encourage idleness.⁶⁴ In fact, Enlightenment writers such as Montesquieu and Rousseau believed that indiscriminate Catholic charity was creating a rise in the number of paupers.⁶⁵ Thus, as was true in the other European countries, in post-Revolutionary France there were two categories of poor: *les véritables pauvres* and *les mauvais pauvres*, corresponding to the deserving and undeserving poor of England.⁶⁶

Therefore, despite the diverse experiences, similar trends existed in Western Europe in perceptions of poverty and practices of poor relief. With the increase in the number of poor and the growth of the notion that poverty was a 'problem', central governments were forced to become involved in administering poor relief. Although poor relief was becoming increasingly secularized, the notion of poverty remained fraught with moral judgments, with the dominant thought positing that work and discipline would solve the problem of poverty.

Of concern to this dissertation is how European, and French in particular, intellectual and social histories of poverty affected how French colonial administrators and writers approached the issue of poverty in Vietnam. How did the legacy of the French Revolution and its humanitarian and democratic ideals translate in a colonial setting? How did the Enlightenment concept of the responsibilities of the state interact with the Vietnamese expectations of Confucian rulers?

⁶⁴ Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor*, p. 27.

⁶⁵ Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth Century France*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Constructing Poverty

While it may be true that poverty has always been a problem for human civilizations, defining it remains a problem. Amartya Sen, foremost analyst of famine and poverty, identifies five approaches to the concept of poverty.⁶⁷ The first is the biological (or subsistence-level) approach, which was first derived from nineteenth-century British poverty researcher Seebohm Rowntree. According to Sen, while this approach, which focuses on the most basic nutritional needs of a person, is problematically vague, it remains central to understanding poverty in the Third World. The second is the inequality approach, which measures the disparity in society, not poverty. Sen argues that this approach is inadequate, for poverty and inequality are not the same thing. The last three approaches are: relative deprivation, value judgement, and policy definition. Sen criticizes these approaches for not getting to the point, that there is "an irreducible core of absolute deprivation in our idea of poverty..."⁶⁸ Sen argues that while the relativist stance of these approaches rightly points to some ambiguity about what constitutes poverty, there is enough consensus within a society as to what is an acceptable level of living to allow researchers to provide a descriptive account of poverty.⁶⁹

With the advent of the postmodernist challenge in the last two decades, however, scholarly research has left few supposedly universal and ahistorical phenomena or ideas intact. The notion of poverty has not been spared the

⁶⁷ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines. An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, Chapter One.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶⁹ Qiu Zeqi and Li Ningjing added five more approaches to Sen's: loss of rights [Sen's Entitlement concept?], ignorance, access to natural resources, structural inequality, and poverty (i.e. the poor lack basic conditions for development). "Zhongguo Xiangcun Pingkun Xianshi Jieshi Zhi Changshi" [The Attempts to Explain the Reality of Poverty in China's Countryside], *Shehui Xue Yanjiu* [Sociological Research], Beijing, 5 (1992), pp. 91-104 (I would like to thank Joanne Poon for helping me decipher this article); See also Sean Stitt, *Poverty and Poor Relief: Concepts and Reality*. Aldershot (Great Britain): Avebury Press, 1994, chs. 1, 2.

deconstruction fever that has engulfed academia. Critics of contemporary developmental practices spearheaded much of the demolition of the notion of poverty. Geographer Jonathan Crush, in the introductory article for *Power of Development*, outlined the agenda of the postmodernist critique of development:

[To focus] on the vocabularies deployed in development texts to construct the world as an unruly terrain requiring management and intervention; on their stylized and repetitive form and content, their spatial imagery and symbolism, their use (and abuse) of history, their modes of establishing expertise and authority and silencing alternative voices; on the forms of knowledge that development produces and assumes; and on the power relations it underwrites and reproduces.⁷⁰

These critics of development, such as anthropologist Arturo Escobar, advance the claim that the post World War Two discourse, which was dominated by Western industrialized countries, produced and problematized the "third world" and underdevelopment. As a result, countries in Asia, Africa, and South America began seeing themselves as "underdeveloped".⁷¹

Just as postmodernist writers consider development an invention for Western intervention and control, so is the "problem" itself: global poverty. While not denying the existence of hunger and malnutrition, Lakshman Yapa argues that poverty is socially constructed from a complex relationship consisting of "ideas, matter, discourse and power":

...[T]he material deprivation experienced by the poor is a form of socially constructed scarcity. Poverty does not reside exclusively in the external world independent of academic discourse that thinks about

⁷⁰ Jonathan Crush, *Power of Development*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 3.

⁷¹ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 6. Also see Mark Berger's critique of the use of the category "Third World", in "The End of the 'Third World'?" *Third World Quarterly*, 15, 2 (1992), pp. 257-275.

it; discourse is deeply implicated in creating poverty insofar as it conceals the social origins of scarcity.⁷²

Yapa explains that the discourse on poverty, which is binary and based on assumptions that unlimited wants and general scarcity are natural and universal, excludes many sites of possible causes and solutions for poverty. For example, the binary distinction between the social scientist (subject) and the poor (object) focuses attention on the poor, while not considering how the subject itself is implicated in the problem:

There is no coherent body of phenomena called poverty whose inner nature can be revealed by studying people who are deemed poor. The causative relations of poverty exist in a dense network of scarcity-inducing discursive and nondiscursive relations.⁷³

In a similar fashion, Majid Rahnema suggests that poverty is a myth. Rahnema argues that since almost all definitions of poverty revolve around the idea of "lack" or "deficiency", "perhaps not a single human being could be found who would not feel 'lacking' in something. What makes the difference between the poor and the 'non-poor' would only be, then, the nature and the perception of the 'lack'".⁷⁴ Relating how the meaning of poverty changed over time and space, Rahnema contends "poverty is basically a social and human construct, or concept trying to define a particular predicament. As such, it is the 'invention of a civilization'".⁷⁵

The idea that there is no commonly shared view on poverty and that the notion of poverty is malleable and historical is not novel among historians.

⁷² Lakshman Yapa, "What Causes Poverty?: A Postmodern View", *The Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 86, 4 (1996), p. 707.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 721.

⁷⁴ Majid Rahnema, "Global Poverty: A Pauperizing Myth", *Inter Culture*, 24, 2 (Spring 1991), p. 4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

There is a rich body of literature by historians on the changing perceptions and representations of poverty from the Middle Ages to the Modern period. Scholars of European history remind readers how much morality and value judgment played in defining poverty, determining who was poor, and directing how poverty relief should be carried out. The poverty line, which is still in use today to delineate the poor and the non-poor, is a good example. Charles Booth, whose own surveys were based as much on judgments about people's morality as on their economic situation, created the poverty line in the 1880s.⁷⁶ Tony Beck contends the process of measuring poverty is usually not as objective or scientific as social scientists tend to represent it.⁷⁷ The word "measure" itself, argues Beck, has other meanings, such as to form an opinion and to regulate, moderate, and restrain. Thus in poverty measurement "measure in its normal usage--that is 'to estimate the amount', cannot be separated from its other two meanings, concerning character and regulation."⁷⁸

Therefore, the historiography on poverty along with the postmodernist critique of contemporary poverty/development discourse, alerts readers to how opaque the representations of poverty are. Frances Gouda's *Poverty and Political Culture* is perhaps the most instructive and explicit historical work, to my knowledge, that demonstrates how the elite's construction and representation of poverty were not necessarily connected or reflective of reality.⁷⁹ Gouda argues that the discourse on poverty and poverty relief of early nineteenth-century France and the Netherlands revealed more about the collective biases, anxieties, and hopes of the elite:

⁷⁶ Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*, ch. 11 ; Tony Beck, *The Experience of Poverty*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1994, p. 11.

⁷⁷ Beck, *The Experience of Poverty*, p. 7.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁹ Frances Gouda, *Poverty and Political Culture: The Rhetoric of Social Welfare in the Netherlands and France, 1815-1854*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publication, Inc., 1994.

...[P]erspective on the problem of poverty and practical schemes designed to improve the indigents' fate were part and parcel of a wider, if often inchoate, set of social values and political ideologies. They entailed distinct notions about weighty issues such as virtue and vice, progress and decline, church and state.⁸⁰

Moreover, the discourse on poverty reveals attitudes toward community obligation, personal accountability, and judgment about modernity.⁸¹ Nineteenth-century French intellectuals, for example, idealized rural life while blaming capitalism and industrialization for the rise in poverty. Consequently, they were preoccupied with urban poverty, which affected fewer people and was milder than the situation in the countryside.⁸²

Inspired by Gouda's work, this dissertation will not assume that the elite's discourse about poverty and the poor reflects the realities of the time. How those considered poor viewed their situation is difficult to discover. Even today it is difficult to know if those categorized as poor based on monetary income would agree with their label or what they think they lack.

Understanding Famine and Famine Relief

This section will provide a brief and general discussion on famine and on the relationship between famine and poverty. There is a need, in other words, to distinguish between periodic poverty and chronic poverty. According to Amartya Sen, famine implies starvation, and starvation implies poverty. Sen writes that the "absolute dispossession that characterizes starvation is more than sufficient to be diagnosed as poverty..."⁸³ He goes on to state that while "regular"

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁸³ Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, p. 39.

starvation is a "normal feature in many parts of the world", famines are the "violent outbursts" of starvation.⁸⁴ According to Sen, it is rare that everyone would experience a famine to the same extent equally. He argues that a famine usually affects only sections of the population:

Indeed, it is by no means clear that there has ever occurred a famine in which all groups in a country have suffered from starvation, since different groups typically do have very different commanding powers over food, and an over-all shortage brings out the contrasting powers in stark clarity.⁸⁵

Arlene Golkin goes further to declare that "famine occurs *only* among people for whom chronic hunger is a way of life."⁸⁶ Golkin and others emphasize that the poor were among those most vulnerable to famine, and famine is "inescapably linked to persistent long-term poverty."⁸⁷

The connection made between chronic poverty and famine by leading analysts of famine challenges the simplistic explanation that famines are caused by natural disasters and/or by an overall shortage of food. This view of famine, termed the Food Availability Decline (FAD) theory, posits that a famine is caused by natural disasters, which bring about a decline in the volume of food produced. According to this theory, everyone--regardless of rank, status, race, age, or sex--in the affected region suffers equally.⁸⁸ According to Vic George, empirical evidence from the past and present shows that the effects of famines are not indiscriminate and a famine can occur even when food production for the

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁸⁶ Arline Golkin, *Famine: A Heritage of Hunger*. Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1987, p. xv. The emphasis is mine.

⁸⁷ Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues, *Famine: A Man-made Disaster?* Pan Books, 1985, as quoted in Vic George, *Wealth, Poverty and Starvation*, New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1988, p. 130.

⁸⁸ George, *Wealth, Poverty and Starvation*, p. 128.

affected area is rising and export is increasing.⁸⁹ In the literature on famine more accurate and sophisticated theories are now favoured, such as Sen's Entitlement approach which analyzes starvation in the context of people's relationships to food. According to the Entitlement approach, a decline of food may set the stage for a subsistence crisis, but temporary food shortage alone usually cannot explain why some people starve while others of the same region do not, or why famine occurs in one country and not another. Despite its shortcomings, the FAD explanation still continues to dominate popular perceptions and media images of famines.

The link between poverty and famine also brings to the fore an issue of how and when a famine should be declared. As with the problem of defining poverty, there is no agreement on a definition for famine even though some criteria and common characteristics exist.⁹⁰ George writes that the dividing line between famine and starvation is often imprecise, and it is sometimes a matter of judgement:

A group of people may, for example, be starving for years, largely unnoticed, but when their plight comes to light and when the numbers dying come to be seen as excessive, that situation may be redefined from one of starvation to one of famine.⁹¹

Who then should decide when people's suffering is a result of chronic poverty or of a famine? More bluntly put, when is the number of people dying from starvation and related diseases deemed sufficiently excessive for the situation to be declared a famine? For political purposes, governments and non-government groups may deny or exaggerate famine conditions. Golkin cites examples from Ethiopia in the late 1950s and mid-1960s, when government

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁹⁰ Golkin, *Famine: A Heritage of Hunger*, p. 18.

⁹¹ George, *Wealth, Poverty and Starvation*, p. 135.

officials denied or ignored the existence of famines and thus did not undertake relief responsibilities immediately.⁹² This example demonstrates the political dimension of famines.

One significant difference between famine and general poverty is society's perceptions and responses to these related phenomena. Following Sen's distinction between famine and poverty, one can say that the link between them is the experience of starvation. With all other factors equal, the experiences of an individual starving during a famine and one starving in normal times are relatively similar. People's generosity, however, is often more forthcoming for the former than the latter case. One may argue that motivating most benevolent responses, particularly on the part of the state and those establishments that have a stake in maintaining the status quo, is the fear of food riots and rebellions. David Arnold suggests that the threat of disorder resulting from food shortage led to the rise of various modern Western European state institutions, laws, and practices:

It can...be argued that in the European context the need to mitigate famine and provision the people was one of the most important factors behind the rise of the modern state, just as the neglect of this responsibility exposed regimes to some of the most serious challenges.⁹³

Governments might be more responsive to the need to relieve famines than to reduce chronic poverty, but at the root of their responses is a similar moral judgement of those in need from either famine or poverty. The British government's dealing with famines in the nineteenth century was revealing in how the ruling elite viewed the moral character of the famine victims. Declaring its unswerving faith in the principles of a free market and laissez-faire approach

⁹² Golkin, *Famine: A Heritage of Hunger*, p. 27.

⁹³ David Arnold, *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 104.

to governing, the British government took little direct action to help relieve the famine in Ireland in 1846–1848. According to Arnold, even "for the most needy, free relief was seen to be highly undesirable, likely to encourage indolence and build up a class of state-dependent paupers for the future, as well as interfering with existing wage levels and terms of employment."⁹⁴ Thus when relief measures were taken, they resulted in the creation of public work projects and workhouses. In other words, the famine victims had to work for their relief.

Similar attitudes emerged in the British colonial government's responses to famines in India. The precepts that guided relief measures carried out in nineteenth-century colonial India were: "no relief should be given without work in return", and "relief should not interfere with the free working of the grain market."⁹⁵ In the Bombay famine of 1876–1878, Sir Richard Temple, the director of famine relief, was assiduous in making sure aid was stringent and that the grain trade was not disrupted. In the workhouses and public work projects, harsh conditions were purposely created so that only the most destitute would seek relief there. Temple lowered the wages at the work projects, arguing that the inadequate wage would weed out the lazy.⁹⁶ Interestingly, just a few years before, Temple had directed a famine relief campaign in Bihar (1874) in which, because of generous and timely aid, there was no mortality.⁹⁷ In the subsequent relief campaign in Bombay, which had a death toll of five and a quarter million people, Temple was under strict orders from his superiors to cut costs. In his unwavering adherence to this directive, Temple justified the ungenerous relief policy as "effective" and "judicious" in not interfering with the grain trade and in

⁹⁴ Arnold, *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change*, p. 112.

⁹⁵ Golkin, *Famine: A Heritage of Hunger*, p. 56.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁹⁷ David Hall-Matthews, "The Historical Roots of Famine Relief Paradigms", in Helen O'Neill and John Toye, eds., *A World Without Famine?* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

the frugal use of public funds, thus demonstrating that social and political expediency was at the root of the state's famine relief policy.⁹⁸

Political expediency and fear of social disorder were also central in understanding the French colonial government's famine relief policies. Like the British in Ireland and India, the French in Vietnam were stringent in famine relief efforts, placing blame whenever possible on the famine victims themselves. In crises, whether it was a house fire or a regional famine, merely being in need was not enough to receive government aid. Victims had to prove that they were loyal, moral, and blameless. Thus, the moralistic definition of poverty, similar to that, which periodically dominated the Western European discourses on poverty as discussed above, played an important role in how the French colonial government approached emergency and famine relief.

Famine and Poor Relief in Chinese History

Instructive here are the works on poverty in Chinese history, framed particularly in terms of famine and hunger. For Chinese historiography the focus has been on examining the role of the Confucian state in famine relief. The general conclusion among those scholars writing on famines during the Qing period (1644–1911) was that the Qing bureaucracy was successful in organizing effective famine relief, particularly in the eighteenth century.⁹⁹ This was accomplished by preventive measures such as maintaining a sophisticated system of state and local granaries, regulating water and land resources, and encouraging migration.¹⁰⁰ The reason for the state's focus on famine relief, according to Lillian Li, was that from "ancient times, the promotion of the welfare of the people was regarded as a major function of the Chinese state. The

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁹⁹ Pierre-Etienne Will, *Bureaucracy and Famine in Eighteenth Century China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990

¹⁰⁰ Lillian Li, "Introduction: Food, Famine, and the Chinese State", *Journal of Asian Studies*, XLI, 4 (August 1982), p. 689.

Chinese state saw itself presiding over an agrarian society, where its chief functions were to maintain harmony and ensure the livelihood of the people."¹⁰¹ The state also promoted private charity as a way to augment its resources. In fact, famine relief was believed to be "the responsibility of the local elite under the general supervision of local officials."¹⁰² Thus, there was tension between the state and the local elite who did not always fulfill their responsibility to help the poor.

The idea that the state was responsible for the provision of the people was an important one in Confucian political philosophy, which Peter Perdue termed, "Confucian paternalism". Out of self-interest, the Chinese "court and its officials were well aware that an essential task of good administration was the preservation of a stable agricultural society."¹⁰³ Studies of food riots in the Qing period show that such an expectation of the state had filtered into mass perception. R. Bin Wong relates that during the Qing period in times of bad harvests, rioters might demand that wealthy households sell their grain locally at a reasonable price or that the state granaries sell or lend out more grain.¹⁰⁴ According to Wong, riots occurred with the expectation that demands be met, and these expectations were reinforced by officials who, while arresting rioters, were also chastising wealthy households for not selling grain cheaply.¹⁰⁵

Nevertheless, there existed ambivalence among Chinese state officials toward famine victims. In reports on food riots in the Qing period, for example, those participating in the riots were sometimes labeled as "poor" or "starving",

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Peter Perdue, "Water Control in the Dongting Lake Region during the Ming Qing Periods", *Journal of Asian Studies*, XLI, 4 (August 1982), p. 747.

¹⁰⁴ R. Bin Wong, "Food Riots in the Qing Dynasty", *Journal of Asian Studies*, XLI, 4 (August 1982), pp. 767-787.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 782.

while other times were seen as "vagrants" or "crafty and cunning".¹⁰⁶ One expects that these moral judgements would dictate the level of generosity of relief offered by the state and philanthropist organizations. On the whole, however, the general thrust of English-language historiography on the Qing period emphasizes the deeply rooted expectation within Chinese history of the state being responsible for poor relief, particularly during periods of famine. This expectation was based on the notion that the Chinese emperor's 'Heavenly mandate' was predicated on his ability to guarantee the people their livelihood.

Paul Greenough notes the difference between the expectations of the Chinese state and those for the Indian political systems. In contrast to China, there was not a strong tradition of state intervention in subsistence crises in India. Greenough writes:

Apart from forcing down prices in capital cities and obliging urban traders to open their stocks during famines, Mughal officials gave little thought to ensuring food availability and price stability throughout the realm.¹⁰⁷

Some Vietnamese kings saw themselves on a parallel plane with Chinese emperors and thus also perceived their roles as benevolent rulers, responsible for the welfare of the people. On a smaller scale, a granary system similar to that in China was organized and instituted in Vietnam, particularly during the nineteenth century under the Nguyen kings. Of interest to this dissertation is how these granaries, which required community organization, charitable donations, and trustworthy administrators, survived under French colonial rule. Moreover, how did the tradition of expectation of state intervention in issues of welfare play out in the colonial context?

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 771-772.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Greenough, "Comments from a South Asian Perspective: Food, Famine, and the Chinese State", *Journal of Asian Studies*, XLI, 4 (August 1982), p. 794.

On Colonialism and Postcolonialism

Recent scholarship on European imperialism and postcolonial societies has been influenced by writings of Post-modernists on the workings of power and knowledge, critics of Orientalism on the representation of the "Other", Feminist scholarship on gender, and Subaltern studies on the colonized peoples' voices.¹⁰⁸ It is no longer acceptable to depict colonialism as a coherent, all-powerful force. Similarly, the colonized are seen as various and complex; no longer is there an image of the colonizer and the colonized as neat categories of oppositional dichotomies. The stress is placed on heterogeneity and hybridity of experience and identity. The works of Anne Stoler, for example, highlight the existence of groups of people in the colonies who were neither the colonized nor colonizers: Eurasians, poor Europeans, and white women of various classes.¹⁰⁹ Stoler shows that *métissage* (interracial unions) and its resulting *métis* "straddled, crossed and threatened the divide marking colonized from colonizer, and subject from citizen."¹¹⁰ This blurring of the line became the focal point of debate in late nineteenth-century Europe because it "called into question the very criteria by which 'Europeanness' could be identified, citizenship should be accorded and nationality assigned."¹¹¹

Blurring boundaries extends into the examination of cultural interaction. Contributors to Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda's *Domesticating the Empire* show how the flow of ideas went both ways between the *métropoles* and

¹⁰⁸ See introductory essay in Frances Gouda and Clancy-Smith, eds., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia, 1998, pp. 1-20.

¹⁰⁹ Ann Stoler, "'Mixed-Bloods' and the Cultural Politics of European Identity in Colonial Southeast Asia", in Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh, eds., *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books, Ltd., 1995, pp. 128-148; "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 31, 1 (1989), pp. 134-161.

¹¹⁰ Stoler, "'Mixed-Bloods' and the Cultural Politics of European Identity in Colonial Southeast Asia", p. 129.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 130

the colonies, how the colonial experience influenced the political discourse in Europe.¹¹² This two-way flow resonates in the discussion about redefining identity in the colonial and postcolonial contexts. Postcolonial literature theorist Françoise Lionnet argues for the idea of "transculturation" in characterizing cultural interactions and identity construction.¹¹³ She argues that the terms "assimilation" and "acculturation" imply one-way transfer, passive acceptance, or loss of one culture to another. Instead, Lionnet suggests that postcolonial writers appropriated the colonizers' tools, such as language and literary techniques, to redefine their realities as they saw them, refuting the "paradigm of exoticism and/or victimization." This idea of "cultural *métissage*", or "transculturation" is helpful with regard to understanding Vietnamese intellectuals operating under French colonial rule. The Vietnamese intellectuals examined in this dissertation were heavily influenced by Western education, ideas, and literature--they were cultural hybrids. How they used the colonizer's tool to construct their realities will be examined below.

The development in the historiography of European imperialism along with the burgeoning field of postcolonial literature and subaltern studies have reshaped the way one approaches writings of the native elite in the colonies. The congruence of the native elite's nationalist politics with the needs and aspirations of the rest of society, particularly the disenfranchised subaltern, is no longer an acceptable assumption. Since the early 1980s the Subaltern Studies Group has been engaged in challenging the metanarratives found in colonialist, nationalist, and Marxist historiographies of India and uncovering the historical

¹¹² Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire. Race, Gender and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia, 1998.

¹¹³ Françoise Lionnet, "Logiques métisses": Cultural Appropriation and Postcolonial Representations", in Kostas Myrsiades and Jerry McGuire, eds., *Order and Partialities: Theory, Pedagogy and the "Postcolonial"*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 111-136.

agency and voice of the subaltern.¹¹⁴ The contention is that nationalist narratives, like narratives of modernity, were produced by silencing other voices.¹¹⁵ Native nationalists, after all, were dependent and accepted the Western premise of modernity. Kwame Anthony Appiah, who writes on African cultural politics, points out that postcolonial

intellectuals in Africa...are almost entirely dependent for their support on two institutions: the African university, an institution whose intellectual life is overwhelmingly constituted as Western, and the Euro-American publisher and reader.¹¹⁶

Appiah continues to state that the first generation postcolonial African writers (1950s-1960s) such as Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, took for granted that "new literatures in new nations should be anti-colonial and nationalist."¹¹⁷ As nationalist endeavours, these novels "are theorized as the imaginative recreation of a common cultural past that is crafted into a shared tradition by the writer."¹¹⁸

Postcolonial novelists' preoccupation with nationalism strengthens Frederick Jameson's thesis that Third World literature should be read as national allegories, and that a Third World intellectual is "in one way or another a political intellectual."¹¹⁹ Jameson's argument has been criticized for its acceptance of a clear demarcation between aesthetics and politics, between art

¹¹⁴ Vinay Bahl, "Relevance (or Irrelevance) of Subaltern Studies", *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 7, 1997. A critic of the Subaltern Studies endeavour, Bahl argues that preoccupation with 'difference' is counter-productive to the struggle against injustice and poverty.

¹¹⁵ Patrick Taylor, "Rereading Fanon, Rewriting Caribbean History", in Gita Rajan and Radhika Mohanram, eds., *Postcolonial Discourse and Changing Cultural Contexts. Theory and Criticism*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995, pp. 19-20.

¹¹⁶ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?", *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (Winter 1991), p. 348.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, 15 (Fall 1986), p. 74.

and propaganda. Critics of this binary construction note "that art is always ideological, that the aesthetic buttresses political hegemony."¹²⁰ To be fair to Jameson, he did not say that First World literature is without politics, but that allegorical structures are "unconscious" as opposed to the more "conscious and overt" allegories found in Third World texts.

When one examines literature written by colonized intellectuals during the colonial period, even realms that were not overtly political can be read as national allegories. Partha Chatterjee, an influential intellectual of the Subaltern Studies Group, charges that "we have all taken the claims of nationalism to be a *political* movement much too literally and much too seriously..."¹²¹ Chatterjee argues that Bengalese anti-colonial nationalism created an "inner" spiritual domain in which it attempted to assert its sovereignty. Within this inner domain, which included the family, education, and culture, the Indian nationalists endeavoured to "fashion a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western."¹²² Consequently, debates about the role of women in colonial Bengal, for instance, were political. In their exhortation and construction of the ideal 'Indian woman'--one that is modern, but not Westernized--Indian nationalists were responding to the colonial discourse of a 'civilizing' mission.

The conflation of nationalist politics with cultural issues was a necessity in colonial Vietnam where colonial censorship banned any political discussion. Hue-Tam Ho Tai found in colonial Vietnam that gender "acted as a coded language for debating a whole range of issues without overstepping the limits imposed on public discourse by colonial censorship."¹²³ Greg Lockhart similarly

¹²⁰ Indira Karamcheti citing Terry Eagleton. "Minor Pleasures", in Gita Rajan and Radhika Mohanram, eds., *Postcolonial Discourse and Changing Cultural Contexts. Theory and Criticism*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995, p. 59.

¹²¹ Emphasis was in the original. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 5.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹²³ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 90.

notes that Vietnamese fiction attacking old customs was an "oblique" attack on the colonial regime, since the French authority tried to maintain traditional customs in the hope of keeping social stability.¹²⁴ This dissertation will show that statements about national survival and independence were voiced outside the conventional political realm and were instead buried within journalistic discussion on charity and poor relief and within prose literature.

This Dissertation

Influenced by both historians of poverty and the new multidisciplinary post-colonial/post-modernist studies, I hope to bring their insights and findings into my analysis of French and Vietnamese discourses and representations of poverty and poor relief. On the theoretical level, this study will touch upon a contemporary concern of how poverty is defined and by whom. That is to say, poverty is a socially constructed concept as Lakshman Yapa and others claim. I am working on the assumption that while there exist people who lack basic food, water, and shelter, poverty as a category or label is largely dependent on who defines it and for what purpose. How a certain individual, a group of people, or an entire country is classified as poor is not a given. Classifications have resulted from discourses in which power, race, class, and gender played significant roles in determining who is poor and who needs/deserves governmental assistance. And, of course, how one defines poverty also determines how one goes about poverty relief.

The focus will be on the French and the elite Vietnamese who were carrying out poor relief and writing about poverty. Examining French relief efforts during famine and subsistence crises provides insight into how French colonial administrators presented the problem, and how they reconciled their

¹²⁴ Lockhart, "Broken Journey: Nhat Linh's 'Going to France'", *East Asian History*, 8 (December 1994), p. 76.

'civilizing' mission with colonial poverty. The Northern Vietnamese elite generally shared the French's patronizing attitudes toward the poor and modernist assumptions about economic progress. Their discourse on poverty, however, was a nationalist discourse in which they attempted to assert their authority in understanding poverty and avail themselves as the binary opposite of the poor in solving the "problem".

Chapter 3: Poverty and Poor Relief in Nineteenth-Century Vietnam

Providing poor relief had an important role in the Confucian political philosophy. Within the East Asian Confucian worldview, the level of prosperity and peace in a ruler's domain was proof of the legitimacy of his claim to power. State assistance and welfare policies were ways to assert the moral authority of the state. This chapter will present a general sketch of the practices of poor relief under the Nguyen dynasty (1802-1883). In addition to examining welfare policies and short-term emergency aid, this chapter will also explore the Nguyen monarchs' perceptions of poverty and their responsibility toward the poor. This chapter will suggest that the dominant view of poverty during the nineteenth century revolved around the issue of land and livelihood. More specifically, the poor were seen as those who did not have any or enough land to maintain a subsistence level of living. The analysis of poverty in nineteenth-century Vietnam, therefore, was centred on people's access to resources (i.e. land), rather than on the individual's lack of education or on the society's cultural practices.

The chapter will begin with an overview of village organization and living conditions. In trying to assess the situation during the Nguyen rule, one needs to balance the rosy picture offered by non-Communist Vietnamese historians such as Pham Cao Duong, and harsh depictions by Communist historians in the pre-*Doi Moi* (Renovation) period.¹ Moreover, the cornerstone for the present historiography on the Nguyen period is the official state records, such as the *Dai Nam thuc luc chinh bien* (The veritable records of Imperial Vietnam), which

¹ While I was conducting research in Hanoi in 1996-7, on several occasions I overheard jokes made by established scholars and Party cadres that it was now ok to admit that the Nguyen kings were not completely bad, and that there were some good things about their rule.

although an invaluable primary source, represent what the state deemed to be of interest for posterity.² Reliance on state records would not provide insight into how the communal-field system actually worked in the villages, or how effective the granaries were in warding off famine. What follows, therefore, is more how poor-relief was supposed to work, rather than how it actually worked.

Village Life in Northern Vietnam

In 1831 Vietnam was comprised of thirty-one provinces, under which were smaller jurisdictions: the prefecture (*phu*), the sub-prefecture (*chau*), the district (*huyen*), the canton (*tong*), and the village or commune (*xa*).³ Considered the basic unit of social organization in Vietnam, the village was usually made up of two to five hamlets (*thon*). This schematic representation of rural organization is complicated with the term, *lang*, a Vietnamese term as opposed to the Sino-Vietnamese term *xa*. *Lang* can also be translated as village or commune. According to Nguyen Van Ky, in the North, a *xa* can be comprised of one or many *lang*.⁴ When a *lang* is part of a *xa* it takes the name *thon*, a term that is used more in official writings. There is a tendency among Vietnamese writers, however, to use the terms *xa* and *lang* interchangeably, with a preference for *lang* since it carries emotional connotations.⁵

The head of the village in the nineteenth century was the village chief (*ly truong*). Assisted by the deputy chief or chiefs (*pho ly*), the village chief acted as the village representative and was responsible for tax collecting, village

² For a discussion on primary sources for Nineteenth-century Vietnam, see Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*. Second ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 323-325.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁴ Nguyen Van Ky, *La société Vietnamiennne face à la modernité*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995, p. 16.

⁵ Nguyen Tu Chi, "The Traditional Viet Village in Bac Bo: Its Organizational Structure and Problems", in *The Traditional Village in Vietnam*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1993, p.46.

security, and authorizing deeds and contracts.⁶ The village head and his deputies had to be elected by the council of notables or village elders (*hoi dong hao muc*), which was composed of mandarins, active and retired village chiefs and deputy chiefs, and old people. This council, led by the *tien chi* and *thu chi*, was not the agent for the state, but was a "permanent elite" that ran the private affairs of the village.⁷ According to Nguyen Van Huyen (a pioneering scholar of Vietnamese ethnography and former Minister of Education for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam), there were two "principal customs" that organized village hierarchy.⁸ The first was "*vuong tuoc*" (king's title) which conferred power on those who had received titles from the king. In this ranking scheme, mandarins would be at the top. The second principle, the "*thien tuoc*" (divine title) favoured age over all else. In many places, however, the combination of these two principles guided how people were ranked in a village. This ranking system was applicable for adult male members of a village. One's rank determined one's access to privileges in village life, from the amount and quality of communal land one received to one's seating at a village function. Village hierarchical organization was tediously regulated to the extent that at village feasts rank also determined which part of a pig a village member would be entitled to eat.⁹

Village leaders did exercise considerable power, since in public affairs the central state only recognized the village and not the individual.¹⁰ Northern Vietnamese villages cultivated a reputation for being independent not only with

⁶ Nguyen Van Huyen, *The Ancient Civilization of Vietnam*. (Reprint and Re-edited, first published in 1944) Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1995, pp. 84-85.

⁷ Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976, p.116.

⁸ Nguyen Van Huyen, *The Ancient Civilization of Vietnam*, pp. 80-81.

⁹ Village politics was the subject of ridicule by novelists of the 1930s. Nguyen Cong Hoan's *Cai thu lon* [The pig's head, 1939] was a satirical account of two villagers competing for the highest rank in the village, a position that would allow them to claim the pig's head at village feasts.

¹⁰ Nguyen Van Huyen, *The Ancient Civilization of Vietnam*, p. 83.

regard to the central state, but also with regard to other villages.¹¹ However exaggerated this village independence was vis-à-vis the central government, village leaders vigilantly guarded their control against outside forces, from the Vietnamese court and its bureaucracy to the French colonial administration. The French attempted to weaken this village autonomy by introducing three sets of reforms in 1921, 1927, and 1941. The main objectives were to reorganize village politics by introducing an elected communal council and establishing a budget. These reforms, however, were reversed in 1941--the committee of lineage representatives (*hoi dong tong bieu*, established in 1921) and the council of notables (re-established in 1927) were replaced with one council of notables of mandarins, diploma holders, officials and functionaries. Elections were also abolished.¹²

Historians have little reliable information on the living conditions of ordinary people, especially poor peasants of nineteenth-century Vietnam. This is no doubt a result of the fact that the pre-colonial economy, in the words of Alexander Woodside, "remains a virtual mystery".¹³ Even accurate data on the population count is difficult to ascertain, since only tax-paying adult males were recorded in official registries, and often these numbers were under-reported by village administrators.¹⁴ It was only in the 1930s that European researchers such as Pierre Gourou conducted rural surveys providing some information on the living conditions of Vietnam's peasants. Gourou himself noted the problem with the 1931 census data, on which he based his analysis.¹⁵ As John Kleinen's

¹¹ Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, p. 154.

¹² Duong Kinh Quoc, "To chuc quan ly lang xa Viet Nam" [The organization of Vietnamese village management], lecture presented at École Française d'Extrême Orient, Hanoi, December 11, 1996.

¹³ Woodside, *Community and Revolution*, p. 120.

¹⁴ Nguyen Duc Nghinh, "Land Distribution in Tu Liem Distric According to Land Registers", *The Traditional Village in Vietnam*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1993, pp. 212-3.

¹⁵ Pierre Gourou, *the Peasants of the Tonkin Delta*, vol. 1, translated by Richard Miller. New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, Inc., 1955, p. 152.

discussion on colonial ethnography shows, the colonial context in which Gourou and other European social scientists operated limited the questions they asked, and conclusions drawn.¹⁶ The following sketch, therefore, is an impression based on various sources and assumptions, and does not claim to be a definitive description of all Vietnamese villages.

Peasants of Northern Vietnam's Red River Delta were dominantly wet-rice cultivators. The elaborate irrigation system allowed double cropping in the Northern delta, thereby enabling the delta to support a dense population. According to rural historian Vu Huy Phuc, the lives of poor peasants in early nineteenth-century Vietnam were circumscribed by the following burdens: heavy taxes, military recruitment and labour corvée, exploitation by village power holders and mandarins, usurious loans (usually at rates of over 50 percent), natural disasters, and famines.¹⁷ Vu Huy Phuc contends that the exploitation and its miseries led poor peasants to rebel and thus accounted for the numerous uprisings in the nineteenth century. He claims that in the first sixty years of the nineteenth century alone, there were 415 rebellions.¹⁸ By the middle of the century, a large-scale epidemic (1849-1850) and famine (1856-1857) further ravished and impoverished the peasants.

In addition to the above-mentioned grievances of the peasants, population pressure, particularly in the Red River Delta, was often cited as a problem. Historian Nguyen Duc Nghinh, using land registers of 1805 for villages in the Tu Liem district, shows that the average farm size was small, and in some

¹⁶ Chapter Two discusses this issue further. John Kleinen, "The Village as Pretext: Ethnographic Praxis and the Colonial State in Vietnam", in Jan Breman *et. al.*, eds., *The Village in Asia Revisited*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 353-393.

¹⁷ Vu Huy Phuc, *Tim hieu che do ruong dat Viet Nam nua dau the ky XIX* [Examining the land system in Vietnam in the first half of the nineteenth century]. Hanoi: Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1979, p. 387.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

cases, too small for household subsistence.¹⁹ The area under investigation is located between the Red and Day Rivers, part of Quoc Oai prefecture, Son Tay province in the nineteenth century. The area now is part of the suburb of Hanoi. The following table of private land ownership was based on fifteen communes/villages in Tu Liem.

1. Private Land Ownership in Tu Liem²⁰

Amount of private land owned (1 <i>mau</i> = .36 hectare)	Total owners (N= 1,894) %	female owner** (N=467) %	male owners (N=1427) %	Percentage of total private lands/fields (= roughly 1,656 hectares)
Less than 1 <i>mau</i>	35.42	45.18	32.24	8.02
From 1 to 3 <i>mau</i>	37.43	37.47	37.42	28.70
From 3 to 5 <i>mau</i>	14.94	10.06	16.54	23.34
From 5 to 10 <i>mau</i>	10.03	5.78	11.42	27.84
From 10 to 20 <i>mau</i>	1.95	0.21	2.52	10.99
From 20 to 30 <i>mau</i>	.21	0	.28	2

** No information was provided with regard to the situations of these female landowners. For example, we do not know how many were widows and how many were married women with land registered under their own names. Although sons usually inherited land, there is some evidence that daughters sometimes also received land inheritances.

From the information presented by Nghinh, we can see that the majority of the rural landowners in Tu Liem were small land-owning peasants.

Approximately 73 percent of the landowners had under three *mau* (or under 1.08 hectares) of land, while close to 25 percent owned from three to ten *mau* (or 1.08-3.6 hectares), and only two percent had more than ten *mau* (3.6 hectares). Of the total number of registered landowners, only 25 percent were women, and of this about 83 percent had less than three *mau* of land. In comparison, close

¹⁹ Nguyen Duc Nghinh, "Land Distribution in Tu Liem District According to Land Registers", Tables I, II, and III.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, table III.

to 70 percent of male landowners had less than three *mau* of land. In fact, 45 percent of the female landowners had less than one *mau*. Thus, from the data it is clear that the majority of peasants had very little land, and moreover, the few women landowners that there were tended to have even smaller plots. This portrait of a fragmented land-holding pattern is consistent with other findings for the Red River Delta area, continuing well into the mid-twentieth century.²¹

Although historians do not have information about the productive capacity of land in the nineteenth century, in the 1930s the average annual yield in Northern Vietnam was about 1080 kg of paddy per *mau*, (assuming two harvests per year, which was the general case for the Red River Delta).²² Charles Keyes speculates that "the peasantry in Vietnam unquestionably suffered from a decline in rice yields during the colonial period" due to increased intensification of land use without any improvement in agricultural technology or practice.²³ If he is right, then the yield for the 1800s can be estimated to be about 1080 kg/*mau*, or slightly higher. Data collected in the 1930s estimated that the average annual ration of rice for each individual was approximately 337 kg of paddy²⁴ (which implies roughly 2144 calories per day²⁵). Thus one *mau* of land could have provided enough food for three adults, leaving a surplus of 69 kg of paddy rice for taxes and other expenditures.

Contrary to Vu Huy Phuc's assertion that the Nguyen dynasty's tax burden was heavy, other writers, such as Mai Khac Ung, argue that this was not

²¹ Nguyen Tu Chi, "The Traditional Viet Village in Bac Bo: Its Organizational Structure and Problems", *The Traditional Village in Vietnam*, p. 58.

²² This average, which was recorded as 3,000 kg of paddy per hectare, came from Gourou's research. Pham Cao Duong, *Vietnamese Peasants under French Domination*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1985 (first published in Vietnamese in 1967), p. 71.

²³ Charles Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995, p. 210.

²⁴ Pham Cao Duong, *Vietnamese Peasants under French Domination*, p. 125.

²⁵ 337 kg of paddy equals to about 223 kg of rice. The World Bank estimates that 13 kg of rice a month would provide about 1500 calories a day. World Bank, *Viet Nam Poverty Assessment and Strategy*, Report No. 13442-VN, January 23, 1995, p. 4.

so. According to Ung, tax rates during the Nguyen dynasty did not (in principle) exceed eleven percent of the total harvest.²⁶ One writer records that in 1830 the highest tax rate for the top quality communal land in Northern Vietnam was 120 *bat* of rice per *mau* (roughly 54 kg/*mau*, which is 82 kg of paddy).²⁷ The top quality private land was taxed at 46 *bat/mau* (the tax rate for public ricefields was generally higher than that for private fields). On an average yield of 1080 kg of paddy per *mau*, this equates to 7.6 percent of farm income. For poorer quality land, the tax rate was about 20 *bat/mau* (9 kg/*mau*). Therefore, the formal tax rate for top quality land during the Nguyen dynasty can be estimated to be between seven and eleven percent of peasants' rice production.

In addition to the land tax, the other major tax was the head tax, which was levied on every healthy adult male (20 years and over). By law even those without property had to pay this head tax which usually amounted to one to two *quan* per year.²⁸ In practice, however, people paid less head tax than their obligation. Both the head and land taxes were assigned on a village level. In other words, villages, and not individuals, were taxed and it was the responsibility of village leaders to divide up the tax burden and collect the dues from individuals. The amount villages paid depended on how many adult males they had in their register. Historians estimate that, in general, these registers only recorded one third of the eligible taxpayers,²⁹ and thus alleviated the tax burden on the village as a whole.

²⁶ Mai Khac Ung, *Chinh sach khuyen nong duoi thoi Minh Mang* [The policies to improve agriculture under Minh Mang], Hanoi: Van Hoa Thong Tin, 1996, p. 171.

²⁷ To Lan, "On Communal Land in the Traditional Viet Village," in *the Traditional Village in Vietnam*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1993, p. 190. I relied on the conversion system provided by Li Tana and Anthony Reid (*South Vietnam Under the Nguyen*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993, pp. 145-6), to convert *bat* to Kilograms. According to Li Tana and Reid, 1 *bat*=0.5 litre and one litre would amount to around 900 grams of rice or sugar.

²⁸ *Kham dinh Dai Nam hoi dien su le* [Official compendium of institutions and usages of Imperial Vietnam], vol. 4, section 38. Hue: Thuan Hoa, 1993, pp. 87-96.

²⁹ Pham Cao Duong, *Vietnamese Peasants under French Domination*, p. 94.

From this discussion it appears that owning one *mau* of land would probably support a household of three at the bare minimum level, with a tiny surplus to spare for taxes, education (which would have been available to only boys), medicine, religious rituals, and family celebrations. A bad harvest, however, would spell trouble for these peasants. From the table above, 35 percent of the landowners had less than one *mau* of land. This suggests that over one third of the peasant landowners would have had problems making ends meet even in normal times.

Although the information presented by Nghinh represents only a small sample of villages for one specific year, it may not be a grossly inaccurate working hypothesis to assume similar conditions for the other areas in the Red River Delta, where the majority of the population of North Vietnam was concentrated. The majority of the Vietnamese peasants in North Vietnam during the nineteenth century were living at a level, which by our present standard would be considered poor. A third of the peasants might be categorized as living in absolute poverty, since they might have had to contend with hunger for several months of the year. As for landless peasants, I have no record of their number. Presumably their presence would increase the percentage of people considered poor.

This discussion so far did not take into account the existence of public-owned rice fields, which would have helped poor peasants by providing them with some extra land. Although I will focus more on public land below, it suffices to say here that the public-land system was intended to contribute (however slightly) to closing the gap between the rich and poor. In the communes studied by Nghinh, for instance, 31 percent of the total land was village public rice fields, to be used for communal purposes and/or for distribution to village members for cultivation. Therefore, even though the portrait of Vietnam's

peasantry was a bleak one, in which the majority of peasant households struggled day-to-day on the brink of destitution, there were various state and village institutions that offered some measure of relief and security for the rural inhabitants.

The Role of the State:

Some historians place Vietnam within the East Asian cultural sphere; that is to say, under the influence of China and its Confucian philosophy. Vietnam inherited its Confucian traditions during the thousand years of Chinese colonialism (111 BC - 939 AD), and the various dynasties that ruled Vietnam after independence continued to maintain and modify the philosophy. During the Nguyen dynasty, which began in 1802, Confucianism was revitalized and strengthened.

As Confucian rulers, the Vietnamese monarchs took on the title of "Son of Heaven" and saw that it was their moral duty to look after the welfare of the people. According to Alexander Woodside, Confucian kings were judged by "how prosperous the 'livelihood'...of the people under them was. This was considered to reflect the wisdom or unwisdom of their policies."³⁰ Therefore, if a king were unable to protect and provide for the people, they would have the right to depose him, since he obviously had lost the "mandate of Heaven". Thus the Vietnamese rulers, like their Chinese counterparts, had strong impetus to concern themselves with making sure people had enough land to farm, that dikes and canals were built and maintained, and that preventive measures were taken to avoid severe famines during natural disasters. According to Vietnamese historian Dao Duy Anh, the kings often issued decrees encouraging agriculture, and were often concerned with dike and canal building and

³⁰ Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, p. 9.

maintenance.³¹ In addition, the Vietnamese rulers would occasionally limit the amount of land a person might hold so as to avoid gross inequality in land ownership, and they also provided incentives for people to bring new land under cultivation.

Although the influence of Confucian philosophy penetrated the villages, particularly in terms of familial organization, the Vietnamese kings still had to contend with the local heritage in which the village dominated as a nexus of political, and socio-economic power.³² Prior to French domination of Vietnam, villages were known for their independence and self-sufficiency. Thus the village also took responsibility for the welfare of those living within its borders. This shared responsibility at times created a complex and tense relationship between the central and village government. The tension and complexities were evident in the issue of land ownership.

Land and Welfare Policies:

Land was pivotal in the nineteenth-century Vietnamese perception of poverty. At the heart of the central government's welfare policies was the provision of land in order that each subject could attain the minimal level of subsistence. This suggests that the Vietnamese court was defining poverty as mainly the inadequate access to resources, rather than associating poverty with the lack of education or with Vietnam's 'backward' culture and economy, as it would be done in the early twentieth-century by Westernized non-revolutionary Vietnamese intellectuals. This section will discuss the various approaches of the Nguyen State in securing the long-term welfare of the people. These approaches focused on making sure families had access to land, and that more

³¹ Dao Duy Anh, *Viet Nam van hoa su cuong* [A general history of Vietnamese culture], reprint, first published in 1938. Saigon: Xuat Ban Bon Phuong, n.d., pp. 45-52.

³² Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*. Preface to paperback edition.

land be put under cultivation to ease the population pressure. It becomes clear in the following discussion that the issue of land holding was not only about level of welfare, but was also a source of state-village competition over power and control.

The assessment of the nineteenth-century public-land system appears mixed. It was a system that was unevenly and diversely executed. In the 1930s communist leaders, such as Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, severely criticized the public-land system as a feudal vestige:

There are many people, especially foreigners, who are very enthusiastic about the communal land system. They think that communal land partially guarantees the livelihood of the peasants. However, in reality each peasant receives only very little communal land...³³

For Vietnamese historians in the late 1970s who were reassessing the meaning of communal land in the pre-colonial period, its merit was still an issue of debate.³⁴ This reassessment of historians' understanding of the Vietnamese countryside took place in the aftermath of the enormously disappointing failure in collectivization that was becoming apparent, even for the Socialist North.³⁵ The dilemma for Vietnamese historians is that on the one hand, the existence of communal land had conventionally been held as the source of Vietnamese peasants' innate socialistic values. On the other hand, communal land was also seen as a tool used by the feudal state and elite to maintain their dominance and as an impediment to 'natural' economic development.³⁶ Le Kim Ngan, for

³³ Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Peasant Question*. Translated by Christine Pelzer White. Ithaca: Cornell University, 1974, p. 83.

³⁴ The reassessment can be found in the Institute of History's two volumes, *Nong thon Viet Nam trong lich su* [The Vietnamese countryside in history]. Hanoi: Khoa hoc xa hoi, 1977 & 1978.

³⁵ See Van Nguyen-Marshall, *Rethinking Poverty and Peasant in Vietnam after Revolution and War*. Master of Arts thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1994.

³⁶ See articles by Nguyen Dong Chi, Truong Huu Quynh, and Le Kim Ngan in *Nong thon Viet Nam trong lich su*, vol. II. Hanoi: Khoa hoc xa hoi, 1978.

example, argues that the movement toward private land ownership, which represented the emergence of a modern, capitalist economy was hindered by the system of public land distribution. In other words, Vietnam's economic development (as interpreted by Marxist theory) was stunted by Vietnam's traditional public land system. According to Ngan, this "natural" trend toward a variant of modern capitalism would have been preferable for the longer-term economic development of Vietnam even though it might have created more poverty for many disadvantaged groups, and greater gaps between the "haves" and "have nots".³⁷

There is, however, a general consensus among Vietnamese historians that the pattern of land holding before French colonialism was notoriously varied, and its development convoluted, with no decisive linear movement from private to public or vice versa.³⁸ Before the twentieth century, private and public land existed side-by-side, with their proportions varying from village to village and over time, and depending on how the village was originally founded.³⁹ According to Tran Duc, a major reform intellectual of the 1990s, specializing on 'family farms', there was in general more public land in villages that had been established by the state or where the state organized the colonization of frontier land.⁴⁰ This generalization, however, does not seem to fit with what Vu Huy Phuc found for Southern Vietnam. Phuc shows that one of the main factors

³⁷ With regard to the political context of when Ngan was writing this condemnation of the public land system, he might have been critiquing the Vietnamese socialist state's approach to economic development. Le Kim Ngan, "Mot so van de che do so huu lang xa nua dau the ky XIX" [Some issues relating to the system of land ownership in the villages in the first half of the nineteenth century], *Nong thon Viet Nam trong lich su*, vol. 1. Hanoi: Khoa hoc xa hoi, 1977, pp. 78-96.

³⁸ Truong Huu Quynh, "Ve nhung quan he so huu trong bo phan ruong dat cong o lang xa Viet Nam co truyen" [Ownership of communal fields in traditional Vietnamese villages], *Nong thon Viet Nam trong lich su*, vol. 1. Hanoi: Khoa hoc xa hoi, 1977, pp. 65-77.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Tran Duc, *Nen van minh Song Hong xua va nay* [The basis of Red River civilization in the past and present]. Hanoi: Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1993, p. 29.

contributing to the origin of villages in the South was the state-directed military and civilian *don dien* (concessions granted for the creation of frontier colonies).⁴¹ Many villages in the South, therefore, developed from these military or civilian state-created frontier colonies. Nevertheless, private fields rather than public fields dominated the land-holding pattern in the South. Phuc maintains that the communal-field system was introduced in the South by the Nguyen State only in 1837, after Southern villages had already been established.

The importance of public fields, at least for the Northern villages, was that in theory they insured every household had a minimum area of land required for subsistence. According to the specialist on rural land-system in pre-modern Vietnam, Truong Huu Quynh, there were two different types of public land, one owned by the central state, and the other by the villages.⁴² The central government's public land was mainly used to reward officials and members of the aristocracy, while village public land (*khau phan*) was primarily for distribution among village members. Phan Dai Doan, Hanoi village history specialist, calculates that *khau phan* public land generally accounted for about one fifth of the total land in the northern and central regions before 1945.⁴³ It is a contentious issue among Hanoi historians as to who really "owned" the *khau phan* public land. According to Truong Huu Quynh, *khau phan* land originally belonged to the villages, but was slowly encroached upon by the central power.⁴⁴ In 1481 King Le Thanh Tong devised a land division system called *quan dien* which specified how village public land was to be given out and for

⁴¹ Vu Huy Phuc, "Cac loai don dien va su hinh thanh xa thon o mien Nam dau the ky XIX" [Land concession and the appearance of villages in the South at the beginning of the nineteenth century], *Nong thon Viet Nam trong lich su*, vol. 1. Hanoi: Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1977, pp. 136-159.

⁴² Much of what follows on the various types of public land came from Truong Huu Quynh, "Ve nhung quan he so huu trong bo phan ruong dat cong o lang xa Viet Nam co truyen", pp.65-77.

⁴³ Phan Dai Doan, "Ve tinh chat so huu ruong dat cong lang xa" [Nature of public land ownership in the villages], *Nghien cuu lich su*, 199 (June-July 1981), p. 22.

⁴⁴ Truong Huu Quynh, "Ve nhung quan he so huu trong bo phan ruong dat cong o lang xa Viet Nam co truyen", pp. 65-77.

how long.⁴⁵ Under this *quan dien* system, the central state became the indirect owner, since it now dictated how the village public land was to be allocated and also collected taxes on the village public land. The public land system, therefore, was not only a system that provided village members with the minimum level of subsistence, but was also site of competition between the central government and the village elite for control of the villages.

The *quan dien* land distribution system stipulated that land parcels be distributed according to rank and status. Under the Nguyen King Gia Long (1802-1820), for instance, the highest ranking bureaucrat received 18 portions of land, while the average adult male received only 5.5 portions, and widows and orphans received 3 portions (with the size of each portion depending on local practices).⁴⁶ In 1840, however, King Minh Mang (1820-1840) dismantled this distribution of land according to ranks. He ordered that with the exception of military personnel, who received *khau phan* as their salaries, every village adult male would receive the same amount of public land.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, high-ranking village members still had an advantage over common members, since they were usually first in line to get their land parcels and usually took the best fields.

The *quan dien* system also specified that every six years land would be subjected to redistribution. Later, under the Nguyen dynasty, land was supposed to be redistributed every three years. To what extent this stipulation was followed is unclear. To Lan, a historian at Vietnam's national Institute of History (*viên lịch sử*), notes that the "very fact that the statutes had to stress that irregular acts were to be severely punished proves that governmental

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Nguyen The Anh, *Kinh-te va xa-hoi Viet Nam duoi cac vua trieu Nguyen* [Vietnamese economy and society under the Nguyen dynasty]. Second printing, Saigon: Lua-Thieng, 1970, p. 97.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

regulations were often violated."⁴⁸ According to To Lan, during the French colonial period there were villages that divided up land every four to six years, some every ten years, and some with no set time at all.⁴⁹ Another imposition of the *quan dien* system was that it infringed upon the village's land ownership by giving the central government the right to take uncultivated land from one village and give it to another. Furthermore, as time went on, and as the central government's public land reserved dwindled, villages were called upon to provide salary land to members of the aristocracy, government officials, and soldiers who were living or stationed within the village.⁵⁰

In addition to the village *khau phan* fields, there were numerous other types of public land in the villages. In some villages there were fields set aside to pay for village ritual sacrifices and celebrations (*ruong te tu*), and those set aside for public assistance (*ruong tro cap*).⁵¹ Included under the public assistance fields were plots reserved to help widows and orphans, village schooling expenses, and the poor. With regard to land for school expenses, some villages assigned a portion of land to the village teacher and he would be responsible for cultivating it himself. Other villages would use the profit from land designated as school land to pay the teacher and the upkeep of the village school.⁵² Fields for the poor, *ngghia dien* (righteous land), was land that was donated to the village by wealthy individuals to help the poor. The profit the village reaped from this type of land might be allocated to the poor, or given out

⁴⁸ To Lan, "On Communal Land in the Traditional Viet Village", *The Traditional Village in Vietnam*, p. 172.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵⁰ Truong Huu Quynh, "Ve nhung quan he so huu trong bo phan ruong dat cong o lang xa Viet Nam co truyen," p. 74.

⁵¹ Nguyen Dong Chi, "Vai net ve bien phap cuu te tuong tro trong lang xa Viet Nam truoc cach mang" [Some aspects of mutual-aid relief in Vietnamese villages before the revolution], *Nong thon Viet Nam trong lich su*, vol II. Hanoi: Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1978, p. 204.

⁵² This was the case in a short story written by To Hoai, "Giang the" [The vow of the moon], *Tuyen tap truyen ngan truoc 1945*. [n.p., published in the United States?] Khai Hoa, 1994, pp. 7-76.

as loans with low or zero interest.⁵³ Alternatively, the village might use the "righteous" fields to produce rice for the communal granaries (which will be discussed later) to be used in times of scarcity. Another type of "righteous" land was that which was donated to monasteries for the purpose of helping the poor.⁵⁴

It is clear that in nineteenth-century Vietnam there was a consensus that widows and orphans were deserving of community help. However, were all widows and orphans necessarily poor? Surely the widows and orphans of 'respectable', wealthy families would be well cared for, as it would have been considered the families' Confucian obligation to do so. Therefore, it can be assumed that it was those widows and orphans without protection or connection who would have sought or required community support. Similarly, those village members who were recipients of "righteous" land would mostly have been the poor without access to family or kin support. A decision would have had to be made among the village community as to who would be considered poor and eligible for aid. It seems that economic factors alone did not define poverty in nineteenth-century Vietnamese villages. A poor person's standing within the village, and most important of all, the person's undisputed membership in the village, would surely have played a key role in determining whether or not he/she would receive community aid.

Not all villages had public land--neither public land of the *khau phan* type for division among male village members, nor those designated for sacrificial and charity purposes. Some villages had such a small amount of public land that, rather than dividing up the land, the village would use the profit from renting out the fields to help village members pay their taxes. Other villages had only

⁵³ Nguyen Dong Chi, "Vai net ve bien phap cuu te tuong tro trong lang xa Viet Nam truoc cach mang", p. 206.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

enough public land to support those doing military service, or to pay village communal house (*dinh*) expenses.⁵⁵ What, then, happened to the poor in villages without public land? Since village solidarity and mutual assistance were, for the most part, considered moral duties of village communities,⁵⁶ members would have felt an obligation to aid the poor, or at least to help alleviate some of the worst symptoms of poverty within the village. In times of famine, for example, some villages without common sources of relief fund had resorted to selling forestry products, selling their communal hall, or appealing to the well-to-do for donations.⁵⁷

Although villages were forbidden from buying and selling public fields, by the late nineteenth century public fields were dwindling, either through illegal sales or from usurpation by corrupt officials and village notables. However, despite the depletion of public land, the system was still widely maintained into the mid-twentieth century. Yves Henry's rural survey showed that, in 1931, public land accounted for 500,000 hectares in Indochina, with about 3 percent of the village land in the South being public, 25 percent in the Centre, and 21 percent in the North.⁵⁸ One reason for the preservation of public land was that private fields would sometimes be converted into public land through donations or through necessity. Wealthy people would sometimes donate land (*ruong hau*) to the village in return for a promise that the donor would be remembered and sacrifices made in their honour after their death.⁵⁹ Historian Nguyen Dong Chi

⁵⁵ Bui Xuan Dinh, *Le lang phep nuoc* [Village customs, state laws]. Hanoi: Phap Ly, 1985, p. 53.

⁵⁶ See Nguyen Dong Chi, "Vai net ve bien phap cuu te tuong tro trong lang xa Viet Nam truoc cach mang", pp. 215-216; Dinh, *Le lang phep nuoc*, p. 126.

⁵⁷ Nguyen Dong Chi, "Vai net ve bien phap cuu te tuong tro trong lang xa Viet Nam", pp. 210-216.

⁵⁸ As quoted in P. Papin, "Ruong dat cong va chinh quyen cap lang cuoi the ky XIX--truong hop lang Quynh Loi" [Public land and political power to grant villages in the end of the nineteenth century--the case of Quynh Loi village], *Nghien cuu lich su*, 6 (1994), p. 21.

⁵⁹ Nguyen Dong Chi, "Vai nhan xet nho ve so huu ruong dat cua lang xa o Viet Nam truoc cach mang," [Some small observations about village land ownership in Vietnam before the revolution], *Nong thon Viet Nam trong lich su*, vol 1. Hanoi: Khoa hoc xa hoi, 1977, p.50.

also noted that there were occasions when, out of necessity after a natural disaster or other, villages confiscated private land to help the poor. For example, the village of Trung Le of Co Ngu, Ha Tinh province in the late nineteenth century was punished by the French for its role in the anti-French "Aid the King" resistance movement, and, as a result, lost close to 150 *mau* (or 54 hectares) of land. The villagers got together and decided that those families that did not lose any land would give up three tenths of their total land to help those from whom land was taken. In the end, for every *mau* that was lost, seven *sao* (1 *sao*=1/10 *mau*) were reallocated as compensation.⁶⁰ Another way public land could be increased was by reclaiming land from rivers and flooded plains (see next section). These newly recovered lands would belong to the village and would be treated as public fields.⁶¹

Interestingly, some fields classified as "private" actually belonged to groups of people organized by lineage or neighbourhood associations at sub-village levels, such as "*giap*" (hamlet--or smaller division of a village), "*ho*" (same surname groups), or "*hoi*" (voluntary associations or societies). Thus, though these fields were recorded as private in the land registers, they were not totally private in that they belonged to and were managed by groups smaller than the village unit.⁶² Historians have so far found little information on how this type of land ownership was organized and distributed.

Both the central state and the village, therefore, had a role in administering and regulating land ownership, particularly in relation to public land. For villages with public land, this type of land was considered sacrosanct.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2.

⁶¹ Nguyen Duc Nghinh, "May van de ve tinh.hinh so huu ruong dat cua mot so thon xa thuoc huyen Tu Liem (cuoi the ky XVIII dau the ky XIX)" [The situation of land ownership of some villages of Tu Liem district, from the end of eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century], *Nong thon Viet Nam trong lich su*, vol., 1. Hanoi: Khoa hoc xa hoi, 1977 p. 101.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Enshrined in some village codes (*huong uoc*, which was a set of village laws and customs), were rules to protect and maintain the public land system.⁶³ The availability of public land enabled villages to take care of their members and thus created a sense of community solidarity and pride. Receiving a share of public land marked one's membership, as well as one's standing in the village. In addition, the existence of charity land also helped village pride, for it could boast or feel righteous in fulfilling its responsibility to take care of its poorer members.

For the central government, the existence of public land enabled the king to feel that his duty was being fulfilled in providing the minimum level of subsistence to the people, and that his mandarins and officials were being properly rewarded for their loyalty. Nguyen monarchs no doubt also feared the growth of large landlords, and the challenge they might pose to the king's rule. The depletion of public land (and the lack of public land in some villages) was, therefore, a great concern for the Vietnamese monarch. To avert this trend, which could lead to social disorder and the collapse of the dynasty, various Nguyen kings imposed strict rules on land accumulation and the sale of public land. In 1839, for example, Minh Mang ordered that half of the private land in Binh Dinh province be confiscated and converted into public land for distribution.⁶⁴ Vu Huy Phuc, however, suggests that Minh Mang's land reform was motivated by the need to maintain his army. Some of the land converted from private to public went to finance the army.⁶⁵ Phuc also suggests that the state was hoping that by increasing public-land holdings tax revenue would also increase, since tax on public land was generally higher than tax on private land. The result of Minh Mang's land reform, however, was disastrous. Two years after the reform was undertaken, it was reported that there were three hundred

⁶³ Bui Xuan Dinh, *Le lang phep nuoc*, p. 53.

⁶⁴ Vu Huy Phuc, *Tim hieu che do ruong dat Viet Nam*, p. 221.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

complaints lodged by Binh Dinh residents regarding unfair distribution of public land. Apparently village "bullies" claimed the good shares while giving the poor undesirable plots.⁶⁶

Pham Cao Duong optimistically appraises the public land system as follows:

...thanks to the *cong dien* and the *cong tho* [public rice fields] the tilling masses could have access to ownership of property. Even the *cung dinh* ('miserables' or proletarians) could receive a rice field to cultivate...this enabled them to pay taxes and so fulfill their duties to their village.⁶⁷

While the existence of public land was supposed to provide a minimum level of welfare for Vietnamese peasants, their existence in a village was not necessarily as beneficial to the poor as Duong assumes. As an institution, the public land system was vulnerable to elite as well as central state abuses. It was also an institution which was used by the central state in its attempt to assert control over the villages, and which was used in turn by the village leaders to maintain their political hold in the village.

Cultivating New Land:

The process of cultivating new land (*khai hoang* or *khan hoang*) was vitally important in accommodating new families and relieving population pressure in the villages. For the central government it meant not only finding new land to meet the subsistence needs of its people, but also expanding and consolidating its rule over more territory.⁶⁸ Again here one sees the promulgation of welfare policies that had political rewards for the central state, beyond the maintenance

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁶⁷ Pham Cao Duong, *Vietnamese Peasants Under French Domination*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1985, p. 25.

⁶⁸ The frontier land to which the Viet or *Kinh* people expanded was not necessarily unoccupied. There were, and are, numerous non-Viet peoples who lived in the highlands and lowland areas.

of social order. It is thus not surprising that the Vietnamese court played an active role in promoting and organizing *khai hoang* activities. The different forms of *khai hoang* essentially fell into two broad categories: those which were executed voluntarily by the people or the village; and those directed by the government, which could take the form of agricultural land extension, or the establishment of military or civilian plantations (*don dien*).

Khai hoang activities that were initiated at village level played an important part in expanding the amount of village public fields. For example, public land in Cau Hoan village, Quang Tri province in Central Vietnam, increased about 56 percent from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century, mostly as a result of cultivating new land.⁶⁹ Villages usually focused on bringing unclaimed lands around nearby rivers and sea coastlines under cultivation. Although there is no definitive record of how much land individual villages brought under cultivation, some figures do exist. For example, in the middle of 1875, the people of Nam Dinh cultivated 17,000 *mau* (6120 hectares) of new land, while various other villages also received praise from King Tu Duc (1848-1883) for their efforts in cultivating new land.⁷⁰

The state was involved in *khai hoang* in many different ways. The most active involvement was the establishment of *don dien* (frontier colonies). *Don dien* first came into being as military colonies, when the army was sent to the frontier to stake claim to new territories. The formation of *don diens* allowed the army to grow their own food and be self-sufficient. This eased the financial burden on the central government, and also established stable communities in

⁶⁹ Bui Thi Tan, "Tinh hình ruộng đất và phương thức sử dụng ruộng đất công ở làng Cau Hoan" [The land situation and the utilization of public ricefields in Cau Hoan village], *Nghien cứu lịch sử*, 6 (1994), p. 36.

⁷⁰ Nguyen Am, "Vai trò và tình hình khai hoang ở đồng bằng Bắc Bộ vào nửa cuối thế kỷ XIX" [The situation of cultivating new land in the Northern delta in the second half the nineteenth century], *Nghien cứu lịch sử*, 3 (1994), p. 8.

these frontier areas, for eventually, these *don dien* would become regular villages in which the inhabitants resembled more farmers than soldiers. The *don diens*, then, served economic as well as security purposes from the perspective of the central government.

During the late eighteenth century, the establishment of *don dien* was intensified in the South, and this period also saw the beginning of civilian *don dien*.⁷¹ Civilian recruits would be organized into brigades similar to those of the army, and would be assigned fields to cultivate. The government would provide land, seeds, tools, and buffaloes; in return the *don dien* farmers paid a certain amount of taxes. Recruits became the owners of land they cleared and cultivated. A significant number of the villages in the south originated from *don diens*. This phenomenon was not as prevalent in the North, which was already more settled than the frontier South, and this helps explain why in the South there were more private than public ownership of land.⁷²

The recruits of civilian *don diens* were, in general, very poor people, without strong kinship or community support, who would have been forced by dire circumstances to leave their ancestral villages. According to Tran Minh Tan, under the Nguyen policies, people in the South were encouraged to colonize new land, and would be given rights to whatever amount of land they could clear and cultivate.⁷³ Therefore, those who voluntarily joined the government-organized *don diens*, where they were required to perform certain

⁷¹ Tran Minh Tan, "Don dien: mot trong nhung yeu to hinh thanh lang xa Nam Bo" (Land concessions for frontier settlement: one factor in the formation of Southern villages), *Tap chi khoa hoc xa hoi* [Journal of Sociology], 29, II (1996), p. 61.

⁷² Vu Huy Phuc, "Cac loai don dien va su hinh thanh xa thon o mien Nam dau the ky XIX" [Types of land concession settlements and the formation of villages in the South at the beginning of the nineteenth century], *Nong thon Viet Nam trong lich su*, vol 1. Hanoi: Khoa hoc xa hoi, 1977, p. 147.

⁷³ Tran Minh Tan, "Don dien: mot trong nhung yeu to hinh thanh lang xa Nam Bo", p. 65.

duties and obey military-like discipline, were usually the ones who had no resources to undertake land reclamation and cultivation on their own.

In addition to setting up *don diens*, the Vietnamese court also actively encouraged officials, aristocrats, local leaders, and the wealthy to recruit peasants to settle new land. A system of reward and punishment was used throughout the nineteenth century to promote the expansion of cultivable land. In 1875-1876 King Tu Duc established offices to increase colonization of the midlands, highlands, and frontier areas. This colonizing project received much attention during Tu Duc's reign, and continued until 1883 when French colonization of Vietnam was complete.⁷⁴

Closely connected to the expansion of cultivable land was the building and maintaining of hydraulic infrastructure in the rural areas. The Nguyen monarchs in the nineteenth century, like those rulers before them, were responsible for building and maintaining major dikes, canals, and waterworks to ensure proper functioning of agriculture. There was a centralized office with an appointed supervisor, group of advisors, and managers to oversee the workings of the dikes.⁷⁵ Villages were also required to maintain the dikes and canals within their boundaries. Labour or cash contributions for annual dike and canal repairs were required obligations of all healthy male village members.

Essentially then, the Nguyen dynasty's policies for ensuring the long-term welfare of its subjects centered on the provision of cultivable land and on providing necessary irrigation works to improve cultivation. These policies focused on securing a livelihood for the peasants, rather than focusing on

⁷⁴ Nguyen Am, "Vai net ve tinh hinh khan hoang o dong bang Bac Bo vao nua cuoi the ky XIX", [The situation of cultivating new land in the Northern delta in the last half of the nineteenth century], *Nghien cuu lich su*, 3 (1994), p.7.

⁷⁵ *Dai Nam dien le toat yeu* [A summary of the statutes of Imperial Vietnam]. 1909, trans. into modern Vietnamese by Nguyen Si Giac. Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1993, pp. 545-7.

inculcating the peasants with knowledge about hygiene or habituating them with frugal practices, as would be attempted later by the French and Vietnamese elite. It is difficult to ascertain how effective these approaches were in providing the poor with a reasonable standard of living. Before the twentieth century, there were very few opportunities outside of subsistence agriculture to provide alternative livelihoods for Vietnamese peasants, and the security of a minimal access to land was thus crucial. Both the public land system and the *khai hoang* policies had other functions beyond general welfare of the people. Both represented ways that the Nguyen monarchs could strengthen their rule by discouraging the emergence of powerful large landowners, collect more taxes, and extend their territorial frontiers.

Short-Term Relief

While most Vietnamese peasants in Northern Vietnam might have had cultivable land to meet subsistence needs most of the time, natural disasters were frequent and expected occurrences over most of Vietnam's rural areas and these could drive otherwise self-sufficient peasants into dire poverty. To mitigate against catastrophic situations, which might also threaten order and stability (the highest priorities of a righteous Confucian government) the Nguyen rulers had a system of emergency aid which included tax relief, loans, grants, and the distribution of rice and other necessities. In times of natural disasters or other troubles, the Nguyen king would typically issue tax reduction ordinances. In 1808, for example, Quang Duc, Binh Dinh, and Phu Yen provinces suffered from droughts and so taxes were reduced according to how much loss was involved. For those provinces that lost 40 percent of their harvest, taxes were reduced by 20 percent, those whose loss was 90 percent had their taxes reduced by 70

percent, and those whose loss was total, were exempted from taxes for that year.⁷⁶

An important emergency-relief institution was the public granary system, which stored rice for use in times of scarcity. Like the granary system in Qing China,⁷⁷ the system in Vietnam was made up of several different types of public granaries: *thuong binh* (ever-normal granary), *nghia thuong* (charitable granary), and *xa thuong* (village granary). The *thuong binh* granaries (later called the *binh chuan thuong* under King Tu Duc) were established and administered by the central government. The rice stored in these granaries was used to regulate the price of rice, especially during crises, and was distributed either without charge or as loans to the poor.⁷⁸ The *nghia thuong* were located in the province and district capitals and were established in part with tax money or rice set aside by the government, and in part through donations from wealthy individuals.⁷⁹ *Xa thuong* were organized and administered at the village level and operated differently from village to village.

According to Nguyen The Anh, *Xa thuong* apparently proliferated under the rule of King Tu Duc, who ordered every commune/village (*xa*) to establish its own granary.⁸⁰ How many village granaries were actually set up in accordance to Tu Duc's decree is another matter. The general practice, according to Nguyen Dong Chi, was that in villages with public lands, certain fields might be set aside to produce rice for the *xa thuong*.⁸¹ In other villages, annual fees, sometimes in the form of field taxes, were collected from village members. In

⁷⁶ *Kham dinh Dai Nam hoi dien su le*, vol 5, section 63, p. 400.

⁷⁷ Lillian Li, "Introduction: Food, Famine, and the State", *Journal of Asian Studies*, XLI, 4 (August 1982), p. 696.

⁷⁸ Nguyen The Anh, *Kinh te va xa hoi Viet Nam duoi cac vua trieu Nguyen*, p. 139.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-141.

⁸¹ Nguyen Dong Chi, "Vai net ve bien phap cuu te tuong tro trong lang xa Viet Nam truoc cach mang, p. 208.

most villages, donations from individual village members were encouraged, and in times of trouble, even coerced. *Xa thuong* rice could be distributed when there was a lost harvest or local famine, as low-interest loans to those in need, as aid to the poor during epidemics, or to help support families of soldiers.⁸² In 1863 Tu Duc's order even stated that villages that were able to keep their members from dying of hunger during famines would be subsequently rewarded.⁸³ Like the village public land, the village granaries were considered an important village institution and regulations regarding their establishment and administration were recorded in the village codes.⁸⁴

The Imperial records of the Nguyen dynasty show that public granaries were put to use frequently during the nineteenth century.⁸⁵ Vietnamese monarchs kept a regular watch over the price of rice, and, when it was considered too high, paddy from public storage would be sold to bring the price down. For example, in 1816, King Gia Long issued an Imperial Order stating that, since the cost of rice in Nghe An province (in Central Vietnam) was high and the people poor, the mandarins were ordered to open the public paddy storage and sell to the people at a reduced price.⁸⁶ During times of famine, the Nguyen kings routinely ordered the distribution of rice from the public granaries to help the poor.

Recognizing the importance of timeliness in providing emergency aid, Gia Long in 1811 ordered that local mandarins take their own initiatives in coping with emergencies. The edict stated that, rather than wait for orders from above, local mandarins must assess the situation and take whatever measures were

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Nguyen The Anh, *Kinh te va xa hoi duoi cac vua trieu Nguyen*, p. 141.

⁸⁴ Phan Khe Binh, *Viet Nam phong tục* [Vietnamese customs], reprint. Ho Chi Minh City: Tong Hop Dong Thap, 1990, pp. 191-195.

⁸⁵ *Kham dinh Dai Nam hoi dien su le*, vol 5, section 63. Hue: Thuan Hoa, 1993

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

necessary to help the local population. Only after all that could be done was accomplished, should they write reports to the central government.⁸⁷ Even though local officials were given responsibility to look after emergency relief, the king continued to issue orders providing additional instructions for helping those in need. In 1817 Gia Long ordered extra aid be given to the people (especially widows and orphans) who were suffering from a bad harvest in Nghe An province. Thus, in addition to the large quantity of public paddy which had been sold at reduced price in Nghe An, more paddy was ordered to be distributed to the poor to help them through to the next harvest.⁸⁸

To ease the financial burden on the state in providing emergency relief, Vietnamese monarchs also instituted an elaborate system of rewards to encourage the rich to contribute to the granaries during ordinary times, and to make additional donations during crises. For example, during a flood in northern Vietnam in 1833, King Minh Mang decreed that anyone who helped the poor would be rewarded: mandarins and officials would be promoted, while ordinary citizens would either be given a title or higher ranking, or an Imperial placard recording their good deed.⁸⁹ Similarly, in 1863, King Tu Duc issued a detailed list of the various rewards to be assigned for different levels of contribution. For example, a person donating 2,000 *quan* and up would be promoted to the ninth rank, while those donating 900 *quan* would be exempted from tax payment and military duties for fourteen years.⁹⁰ In addition to emergency aid, King Minh Mang also issued a decree urging provincial officials and rich local households to lend money or rice to the poor to enable them to make ends meet to the next

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Dai Nam dien le toat yeu*, p. 281.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

harvest. Again, rewards of titles and tax exemptions were promised for compliance with the decree.⁹¹

While the Nguyen kings recognized the importance of the granaries during subsistence crises, they also saw this system as a potential threat to their power. In 1821 and 1834 Minh Mang rejected proposals from provincial officials to build granaries at the prefecture and village levels. His refusal was based on the belief that provincial officials were already too powerful, and that granaries would only increase their independence from the court.⁹² The granary system, like the system of communal land, was not only a public welfare institution, but carried with it political weight. On the one hand, village leaders' abuse of the granary system might give them too much power at the expense of ordinary people. On the other hand, if these granaries worked too efficiently, making villages wealthy and self-sufficient, then centralized state bureaucracy might seem redundant.

The Nguyen monarchs also made provisions for assisting the elderly, handicapped, and sick. In general, those over 55 years old and those mildly handicapped had to pay only 50 percent of their head taxes; while those over 60 years of age and those severely handicapped were exempted from the head tax altogether.⁹³ Under the Nguyen dynasty laws, all other healthy male adults were taxed equally, with those in villages with public land having to pay twice as much head tax as those in villages without public land.⁹⁴ However, in practice, poor people generally were able to avoid payment. As mentioned earlier, during the pre-colonial period taxes were levied on villages (not individuals), and since the responsibility was on the village, its members usually had to devise a practical

⁹¹ Dao Duy Anh, *Viet Nam van hoa su cuong*, p. 56.

⁹² Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, p. 162.

⁹³ Dao Duy Anh, *Viet Nam van hoa su cuong*, pp. 85-86.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

way to meet this tax burden, which might mean that not all members had to pay equal amounts.

With regard to the poor who were sick, records indicate the existence of relief homes (*nha duong te*) built to aid them. In 1814 King Gia Long ordered relief homes to be built to provide shelter and medical care for the poor and sick. Local authorities were ordered to bring the homeless and paupers there, where they would receive care and in cases of deaths, proper funerals.⁹⁵ It is difficult to determine how prevalent the relief homes were, or how they were administered. However, during the reign of Minh Mang, more references were made to the construction of relief homes. For example, in 1827, all towns of the north were ordered to build relief homes to aid widowers, widows, and orphans without any familial or community support.⁹⁶

Unlike the institutions for the poor in pre-modern and modern Europe, there was no emphasis on confinement, work, or disciplines as part of these relief homes. It appeared that these relief homes in Vietnam were seen as temporary refuge for medical attention and distribution of food and money. There was no effort made to stigmatize those seeking aid, along the line of European workhouses. Harsh conditions in these latter institutions were intended to deter able-bodied poor from applying for relief.⁹⁷ Taking into consideration the importance placed on family and village membership in Vietnamese culture, for a person to be without such a network of support, and thus to have to resort to state-run relief homes, would be a stigma in and of itself. Moreover, this non-judgmental attitude connected with the relief homes fit

⁹⁵ *Kham dinh Dai Nam hoi dien su le*, vol 5, section 63, p.413.

⁹⁶ *Dai Nam dien le toat yeu*, p. 291.

⁹⁷ Robert Jutte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 169-171.

with the Vietnamese government's view that poverty was not the result of personal failing, but of lack of access to resources.

Mutual-Aid Societies:

At the village and neighbourhood level there were often voluntary, privately organized, self-help and mutual-aid societies which afforded members financial and spiritual support. Enshrined in some village codes (*huong uoc*, which spell out the traditions, customs and laws of a particular village), was the expectation that all members of the village would help each other in crises and also participate in community work projects. According to Bui Dinh Xuan, an expert on village codes, an individual's responsibility toward village duties was deemed essential and, if he/she were not able to fulfill these obligations, then it would mean dishonour for their family and descendents.⁹⁸ Official village ethics thus obliged all members to lend a hand in helping village members in need, with the threat of being ostracized or punished if this responsibility were shirked. No doubt this ideal was not always met in practice, for there are many accounts of corruption, cheating and hoarding by officials and village notables, even during times of trouble.

Mutual-aid societies were based on structured reciprocity, as opposed to spontaneous good will. These societies might be organized as a labour exchange, or as a money savings and lending association. Labour-exchange societies were usually organized among people of the same trade; for example, guilds of farmers, specialty-crop growers, or artisans. Members would help each other prepare their fields, look after each other's water buffaloes, perform night watch over crops, or share equipment and work animals.⁹⁹ In addition to work

⁹⁸ Bui Dinh Xuan, *Le lang phep nuoc*, p. 124-125.

⁹⁹ Nguyen Dong Chi, "Vai net ve bien phap cuu te tuong tro trong lang xa Viet Nam", pp.223-225.

exchange, trade societies might organize ritual feasts and group celebrations.¹⁰⁰ These occasions could be religious and/or social events, where ritual offerings would secure favours of the appropriate deities, while at the same time bonding members together to facilitate future cooperation.

Money savings and lending societies were usually organized among people of the same hamlet, neighbourhood, or street. Members might pool their money together and each member takes a turn to use a relatively large sum for business investment, or to finance an important family ritual or celebration.¹⁰¹ Some societies were organized specifically for helping members finance funerals, weddings, or Lunar New Year celebration expenses. These societies functioned in a similar fashion as the lending societies, in that they required members to contribute regularly small amounts over time, and to be eligible to borrow a lump sum when it was their turn or when it was needed (such as for funerals).

Such societies operated somewhat differently from place to place and over time, but regardless of the variations, these societies provided an important means for average-income households to save and to meet large family expenses, or to have a chance at investing and expanding some enterprise. Urban Vietnamese intellectuals of the early twentieth century tended to dismiss these societies as "eating and drinking" clubs (*hoi an uong*). According to the pioneering left-wing Vietnamese investigators of village life, who were writing for *Thanh Nghi* journal, the mutual-aid societies made little improvement in the lives of their members.¹⁰² *Thanh Nghi* writers contrasted Vietnamese mutual-aid associations to Western European co-operatives, where members grouped

¹⁰⁰ Phan Ke Binh, *Viet Nam phong tuc*, p.202.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹⁰² Le Huy Ruat, "Nhung 'hoi tuong-tro' o thon que" [Mutual-aid societies in the villages], *Thanh Nghi*, 11 (April 1942), pp. 16-19.

together to avoid high-interest rates, to escape dependence on middlemen, or to avoid the risk of market fluctuations.¹⁰³ No doubt Vietnamese villagers would have benefited from such formal co-operatives, but their own mutual-aid societies were also important, allowing them to meet spiritual and cultural as well as economic and social needs. For the most part, the members of these societies were probably not in dire poverty, but generally middle-income households, since they were able to pay regular dues to the societies. Their participation in these mutual-aid societies probably did not make them rich, or significantly improved their economic situation (as per criticisms of the urban intellectuals). However, these societies did help insure against risks and saved many of them from slipping into abject poverty. Without them, many households would have had to find other ways to pay for important family celebrations, such as borrowing at usurious rates, or selling land or other assets. The existence of these various mutual-aid societies also indicates how important social and spiritual activities were to the peasant households. Being unable to participate fully in these celebrations would undoubtedly make a household feel lacking and perhaps, even poor.

Conclusion:

This chapter has examined how the Vietnamese State and villages in the nineteenth century saw their responsibility toward the poor. That responsibility was mainly limited to providing the poor with land and the basic infrastructure to enable them to survive at a subsistence level and, in times of emergencies, by providing temporary relief for those in dire need. In villages with ample public land, poor widows and orphans might have also been given extra aid, and

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* Also see Duy Tam, "Muon tranh su sinh hoat dat do, mot phuong phap: tieu thu hop tac xa" [One way to avoid the situation of high living cost: consumers' cooperatives], *Thanh Nghi*, (June 1941), pp. 2-3, 32; second part in July 1941, pp. 11-12.

village schools supported. Otherwise, villagers had to depend largely on themselves, their relatives, and their neighbours to meet needs beyond the bare subsistence. In some localities residents managed to form mutual-aid societies.

From this brief discussion it appears that, in nineteenth-century Vietnam, poverty was not seen as a major "problem", and certainly not as a systemic social problem requiring systematic state intervention, as would be the case in the late 1930s and 1940s. Poverty was linked to the lack of access to a secure subsistence, and not associated with educational or cultural defects of a particular segment of society. The issue of access to land as a program for poverty alleviation would later be revived by the Vietnamese communist intelligentsia, who linked poverty with colonialism and landlord exploitation. The Vietnamese rulers of the nineteenth century, however, were not advocating socialist egalitarianism in access to land; in fact, inequality in terms of social status and wealth was accepted as normal, and was considered a part of the natural order of things in the Confucian worldview. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese monarchs, like the Confucian rulers in China, were often very concerned when disparities grew too large, or when natural calamities brought severe hardship on the people, as these could pose a threat to social order. Vietnamese kings, however, also saw the powerful village elite as a potential threat. Thus while providing for the poor was intricately woven into the Confucian political philosophy, as it was an expression of humanitarian philosophy, and more importantly, an assertion of political legitimacy, the Nguyen court also did not want to relinquish too much power to the local elites through welfare institutions. Poor relief measures and institutions, therefore, had to be balanced with the state's political priorities.

When the French took control of Indochina they too were ambivalent toward poor-relief institutions such as the granary system and mutual-aid

societies. While the French colonial rulers did not want to shoulder the cost of taking care of village-level poverty, they were not willing to allow independent poor-relief organizations to be formed either. Holding a similar view as King Minh Mang, the French saw the granary system as a potential threat, for it supposedly gave the local authorities too much power and the villages too much independence. For this reason the French dismantled many of the granaries upon their colonization of Indochina. The French also viewed mutual-aid with suspicion and wanted them closely scrutinized. While the French rulers might have shared the Nguyen king's dilemma of having to balance central and local power in dispensing poor-relief, France's colonizing rhetoric made the situation even more difficult for them. Unlike the Vietnamese kings who felt obliged to provide the people with only a secure subsistence, the French 'civilizing' mission rhetoric promised progress and modernization.

Chapter 4: The French Administration and Famine Relief

Since the majority of the Vietnamese people during the French colonial period lived in the countryside and depended on farming and fishing, natural disasters played a devastating and decisive role in affecting their livelihood. Floods, droughts, and typhoons were frequent occurrences that could impoverish entire regions, and on some occasions, even led to famine conditions, particularly in Northern and Central Vietnam. This chapter examines the emergency relief efforts carried out by the French colonial government during periods of food shortages, preceded by natural calamities. It will focus on two subsistence crises: one taking place in 1906 and the other in 1915-1917, both occurring in Northern Vietnam. While there were many other periods of scarcity and famine during the French colonial rule, I chose to examine these two particular crises because the documents in the Resident Superior of Tonkin collection in Hanoi provided a fuller picture of these events than any other.¹

During a major disaster local French and Vietnamese authorities would, as was done by Confucian officials in the nineteenth century, appeal to the government for help in the form of tax relief, grants, or loans. Through their actions, written communications, and reports on the subsistence crises and on famine prevention, French officials in Northern Vietnam revealed the incompatibility of France's 'civilizing' mission with its

¹ Lack of material in the Resident Superior of Tonkin collection is one reason that the infamous famine of 1945 will not be examined here, but also because it is the topic of a detailed book by eminent Vietnamese and Japanese historians, Van Tan and Moto Furuta. *Nan doi nam 1945 o Viet Nam* [The Famine of 1945 in Vietnam]. Hanoi: Vien Su Hoc Vietnam, 1995.

colonizing agenda. Faced with unambiguous poverty--the absolute deprivation in famine situations--French republican ideals and 'civilizing' mission rhetoric were put to the test. While fear of social disorder played an important role in the French administration's famine relief policies (just as it did for the Nguyen monarchs), the colonial context and the French conceptualization of poverty and poor relief made the process more complicated.

'Mission Civilisatrice' and Poor-Relief

In the late nineteenth century France's imperialist exploits in Africa and Asia were justified by its special mission to 'civilize' those in the colonies. This '*mission civilisatrice*', became France's official imperial doctrine during the Third Republic.² At the heart of this doctrine was the belief in the superiority of French culture and the perfectibility of humankind.³ Underlying French faith in the 'civilizing' mission were republican ideals, stemming from the Enlightenment period. Alice Conklin enumerates a core set of values shared by French republicans up until the Second World War:

[A]n emancipatory and universalistic impulse that resisted tyranny, an ideal of self-help and mutualism [sic] that included a sanctioning of state assistance to the indigent when necessary; anticlericalism, and its attendant faith in reason, science, and progress; an ardent patriotism founded on the creation of a loyal, disciplined and enlightened citizenry, and a strong respect for the individual, private property, and morality.⁴

² Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize. The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Civilization in the French republican context meant the mastery of nature, the human body, disease, ignorance, and poverty--entailing moral as well as material progress.⁵ Pivotal in the 'civilizing' mission was the notion of "rational economic development" (*mise en valeur*) of the colonies.

According to Conklin, by the end of the nineteenth century *mise en valeur* "connoted a program of rational, scientific, and progressive colonial development, in which the state would play a central role."⁶

The notion that the state should play a central role in improving the lives of the people gained grounds during the Enlightenment and in the 1789 Revolution. Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu held that the state had a responsibility toward the poor, and that the state "owes to all its citizens a secure subsistence, suitable food and clothing, and a manner of living that is not contrary to good health."⁷ According to Colin Jones, in late eighteenth-century France there was an optimistic belief that "equitable laws and humane poor-relief measures would somehow dissolve the whole problem of poverty."⁸ Jones suggests that this optimism can be encapsulated in the Enlightenment concept of *bienfaisance*--which was supposedly the rational, secular and efficient opposite of the traditional religious charity that dominated poor relief in the *Ancien Régime*.

The 1789 Revolution provided an opportunity for the realization of the "comprehensive and humane social programme grounded in the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52-3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁷ As quoted by Thomas Adams, *Bureaucrats and Beggars. French Social Policy in the Age of the Enlightenment*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 34.

⁸ Colin Jones, *Charity and bienfaisance. The treatment of the poor in the Montpellier region, 1740-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 245.

values of *bienfaisance*".⁹ Although the *Comité de Mendicité*, set up by the revolutionary Constituent Assembly, was not able to put its ambitious poor-relief program into action, the foundation was set for more systematic and comprehensive state intervention in the area of social welfare. Thomas Adams suggests that the Enlightenment social thoughts, as they were formulated in the eighteenth-century debate regarding mendicity, re-emerged in the late nineteenth century. These ideas "nourished the extremely modest legislative beginnings of social security in France from 1893 to 1905."¹⁰

While the idea that state assistance was a "*dette sacrée*" which society owed its poor was in varying degree accepted in theory in post-Revolutionary France,¹¹ the impulse to use poor-relief institutions as methods of repression was also dominant. In the nineteenth century an *Ancien Régime* institution for punishing vagabonds and able-bodied beggars, the *dépôt de mendicité*, reemerged, signaling the state's preoccupation with social control over humanitarian considerations. Furthermore, it should be noted that among the many criticisms Enlightenment social philosophers had against religious charity was that it dispensed aid indiscriminately. Enlightenment thinkers argued that this lack of differentiation between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor was in fact encouraging sloth and idleness. Montesquieu, for instance, believed that the city of Rome's generous charitable foundations "perpetuated a tribe of beggars."¹² The moralistic definition of poverty

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁰ Adams, *Bureaucrats and Beggars*, p. 254.

¹¹ Jones, *Charity and bienfaisance*, p. 160.

¹² Adams, *Bureaucrats and Beggars*, p. 33.

leading to repressive and punitive poor-relief measures played a persistent and dominant role in welfare policies in modern France.

French colonial administrators in Indochina had at their disposal a set of ideals regarding poor-relief. Enlightenment social thought, and the democratic aspirations behind the Revolution bolstered the notion that the state was responsible for the welfare of the people. Inextricably linked to this notion was the moralistic attitude toward the poor, and the perceived need to have repression and punitive aspects in poor-relief measures. These were the contradictions embedded in the colonial milieu, just as contradictory as the fact that the Enlightenment and the Revolution were sources of idealism behind the imperial doctrine of 'civilizing' mission that provided justification for the violence and disruption of colonization.

La Grande Famine 1906

The 1906 famine in North Vietnam was small scale in comparison to the infamous famine of 1945, which killed approximately two million people. Nevertheless, there was great suffering and numerous deaths. A series of natural disasters preceded the famine, beginning with a drought in the summer of 1905. In July of that year the dike at Co Lieu (Ha Dong province) ruptured, and flooded 36,000 hectares of rice fields in Ha Dong, Ha Nam, Ninh Binh, and Nam Dinh provinces.¹³ According to the Chief Engineer of public works, the loss in harvest was around 4,300,000 francs; the cost to repair the dike was about 20,000 francs.¹⁴ In August another dike ruptured, this time at Kim Son in Bac Ninh province. The

¹³ Lantenois, the Chief Engineer of Public Works, Chief of Mine Services, "Note sur les crues et inondations en 1905", *Bulletin économique de l'Indochine*, 49 (1906), pp. 150-152.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

water submerged 30,000 hectares of rice fields in the provinces of Bac Ninh, Hung Yen, and Hai Duong. The loss in crops was estimated to be 3,500,000 francs and the repairs cost 55,000 francs.¹⁵ In late September torrential rains and a typhoon brought further damage to crops in the Red River Delta.¹⁶ The province that suffered the most was Ha Nam, which lost almost all of its tenth month (winter) harvest, while Bac Ninh, Nam Dinh, and Hung Yen lost over fifty percent of their crops.¹⁷ Ninh Binh, Son Tay, Vinh Yen, Phuc Yen, Ha Dong, and Hung Hoa lost between thirty and forty percent of their tenth month harvest. The provinces in the highlands did not suffer much damage.

The flooding and typhoon were followed by another drought in the spring of 1906, threatening the fifth month (summer) harvest. During the food crisis, many provincial administrators attributed the cause of the famine to a general decline in food supplies brought about by the series of natural disasters that befell them in 1905-6.¹⁸ As mentioned in Chapter Two, this conventional "food-availability-decline" (FAD) view is often inadequate to explain causes of famine, for it tends to ignore many other relationships between the people and food production or/and procurement.¹⁹ The FAD explanation, however, was convenient for it absolved the French colonial government from being implicated in the cause of famine.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Bui Quang Chieu, Sub-Inspector of Agriculture, "Résumé de la situation rizicole au Tonkin", *Bulletin économique de l'Indochine*, 49 (1906), pp. 136-149.

¹⁷ Lantenois, "Note sur les crues et inondations en 1905", pp. 152-156.

¹⁸ See for example, the report from the Resident of Bac Ninh to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 92, March 21, 1906, p. 1, Fonds de la Résidence Supérieure au Tonkin (RST) 74.525 *La grande famine 1906*. National Archives Number One of Vietnam, Hanoi.

¹⁹ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, ch. 1.

The *Tuan Phu* (Vietnamese provincial governor) of Ninh Binh province offered a more detailed explanation for the crisis.²⁰ He began by noting that for the most part, the people of Ninh Binh were very poor, they possessed no other resources outside of the land that was largely infertile. The *Tuan Phu* chronicled the problems of the Ninh Binh population: In 1905 a drought destroyed fifty percent of the province's harvest. Thus in the sixth lunar month, after having paid all their taxes, the inhabitants had to borrow to survive. They were counting on the tenth month harvest to pay their debts and to have something to eat. However, in the ninth month a flood and typhoon destroyed their harvest, leaving only a quarter of the harvest. Famine began to be felt in the province by the first lunar month of 1906. As a consequence, 7,000 men and women from Ninh Binh left as recruited workers to build the Yunnan railway. Since the price of rice remained normal, the majority of the people were able to survive through this period by borrowing paddy, pawning possessions, working on the railway, and receiving charity from the rich households and the government.

The situation changed, however, from the end of the second month, when the cost of rice increased dramatically, and wealthy households, having exhausted their own resources through charity, stopped donating. People were now dying by the hundreds, and reports from those who went to distribute aid were that nine out of ten inhabitants were pale and weak with some having had nothing to eat for five to seven days successively. From this report one can see that the decrease in food supply was not the only important factor in causing widespread

²⁰ Doan Chien, Tuan Phu of Ninh Binh to the Resident of Ninh Binh, No. 53, April 6, 1906, RST 74.525.

starvation. Famine occurred when there was a shift in the people's exchange entitlement (when the price of rice rose) and when the communal welfare net (in the form of charity supported by the wealthy households) was depleted.²¹

Similar observations were noted by various provincial administrators--that rice was not in short supply, but that cost made it difficult to procure it. In reflecting on how to prevent future famines, the Mayor of Hanoi wrote:

It was absolutely certain that in the last crisis that we suffered, it was not rice that was lacking, but money to buy and to send it rapidly to the regions that lacked it.²²

The Resident of Bac Ninh noted that this problem existed not only for the famine in 1906, but for other subsistence crises as well:

I have seen it many times that the shortage crises of the Annamites were the result less of a real scarcity of rice than of the monopolizing done by the moneybags to raise prices.²³

These observations showed that government intervention in the rice market to lower the price might have averted or lessened the suffering. The fact that the government failed to intervene demonstrated a lack of political will to aid the population at the risk of offending those merchants and exporters who were profiting from selling rice to the famine-struck regions. The report from the Chief of Commercial Services showed that export of rice from Indochina in 1905 decreased only thirty-six percent

²¹ Sen, *Poverty and Famines*.

²² Mayor of Hanoi to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, "Au Sujet de mesures à prendre en cas de disette", July 24, 1906, RST 75.780 *Commission chargé d'étudier les mesures préventives contre les disettes après d'insuffisantes récoltes du riz au Tonkin, 1906-7*.

²³ Resident of Bac Ninh to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 13, August 6, 1906, RST 75.780; A similar remarks were made by the Residents of Phu Tho and Vinh Yen (No. 489, July 17, 1906, *Ibid.*, and No. 127, Aug 14, 1906, *Ibid.*)

from 1904.²⁴ This decline in rice export seems small when one considers the large amount of loss in harvest for the Red River Delta provinces, as well as the fact that in South Vietnam crops were ruined by an invasion of grasshoppers and Central Vietnam suffered violent typhoons. In other words, while there were people suffering hunger in Vietnam, 153,933 tons of rice were exported abroad.²⁵ What this underscores is that it was not simply a food shortage that caused the famine, but that famine was the result of political choices.

While a definitive mortality figure for all the provinces involved is unavailable, the reports of death indicate that there was a sizable death toll. In April 1906, the Resident of Ninh Binh reported that about six hundred people had died in the preceding ten days. He continued:

One can estimate, without exaggeration, the number of deaths caused by hunger in one month is up to a thousand, and the deaths unfortunately will only increase day-by-day because many inhabitants are weakened by deprivation and can no longer survive a long time.²⁶

In Ha Nam there were also reports of deaths due to starvation, particularly from Mac Xa village.²⁷ Meanwhile, a large number of people left their homes in search of food. Joseph Reydellet, the Resident of Ha Nam, complained that with so many able bodies fleeing the province, dike repairs which were usually completed with *corvée* labour were difficult to

²⁴ G. Dauphinot, interim Chief of Commercial Services of the Department of Agriculture, Forest, and Commerce, "Rapport sur le mouvement commercial de l'Indochine en 1905", *Bulletin économique de l'Indochine*, 53 (1906), p. 577.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Resident of Ninh Binh to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 18c, April 10, 1906, RST 74.525.

²⁷ Reydellet, Resident of Ha Nam to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 64c, Feb 21, 1906, RST 74.525.

accomplish.²⁸ The Resident of Ha Nam painted a grim picture--not only was there famine and the fear of an epidemic swooping down upon (*s'abattant*) the hunger-weakened population, but also the difficulty of getting the dikes repaired. If the dikes were not repaired to protect the next harvest, Reydellet explained, the province would be completely ruined.

Similar misery was reported by the Resident of Bac Ninh in the spring of 1906. He wrote that there were many beggars (mostly the elderly, women, and children) on the streets, and the Mayor of Hanoi informed him that an increasing number of mendicants from Bac Ninh were arriving daily in Hanoi.²⁹ He continued to write that this situation "stirred certain apprehensions" (*soulève certaines appréhensions*) among the population, who feared not only social disorder, but also the outbreak of an epidemic due to the mendicants' presence.

The typical relief measure taken by the French colonial administration of Tonkin was to provide advances and/or grants to the provinces in cash or kind. The money or rice given by the administration was usually designated for distribution to the poor villages or as salaries for workers at the "*chantiers de charité*" which were work sites set up to provide relief through work. The *chantiers* most often involved labourious work such as breaking rocks, or road and dike repairs. Usually workers would have to travel long distances to the *chantiers* and would have to live in make-shift camps for the duration of the work contract, which was usually a month or two. In the colonial archival documents there are references to health and hygiene problems associated with these camps.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁹ Resident of Bac Ninh to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 92, Mar 21, 1906, RST 74.525.

For example, in a food crisis in 1915, references were made to the spread of cholera in the work camps.³⁰ There was also the concern about the recruitment of able-bodied workers from the villages, leaving only the weak to tend to the harvest.³¹

For all the hard work and difficult living conditions, the workers (referred to as "coolies" in the documents) were paid very little. In Ha Nam the workers on road repair were paid ten cents per cubic metre of earth they moved.³² For an idea of how much or how little ten cents was in 1906, the *Tuan Phu* of Ninh Binh calculated that four cents a day could provide a person with one meal of rice or two meals of rice broth a day.³³ Therefore, a worker would probably have to work on at least two cubic metres of earth in order to provide one meal of rice for his/her family. It is difficult to ascertain how much an average famine worker was able to earn daily at the work camps. In a document from the 1945 famine, the Resident of Nam Dinh stated that if the work at a site required transporting earth, a labourer inexperienced in terracing would only be able to manage half a cubic metre a day.³⁴ If this observation holds true for work camps generally, then a worker at a terracing *chantier* in 1906 would be able to earn only enough to feed him/herself. In an appeal to the Resident Superior of Tonkin for more aid in 1906, Reydellet, the Resident of Ha Nam, sympathetically noted that

³⁰ Resident of Phu Tho to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, September 6, 1915, RST 20.550, *a/s de l'Assistance par le travail en faveur des inondés*.

³¹ J. Bride, Resident of Ninh Binh, "Extrait du rapport mensuel de janvier 1916", Jan 1916, RST 75.790 *Secours aux inondés*.

³² Reydellet, Resident of Ha Nam to Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 58, Mar 28, 1906, RST 75.780.

³³ Doan Chien, Tuan Phu of Ninh Binh to the Resident of Ninh Binh, No. 53, April 6, 1906, RST 74.525.

³⁴ Resident of Nam Dinh to the Chief Engineer Agricultural Hydroligue, February 22, 1945, RST 74.524 *La grande famine de 1945*.

[the] coolie who makes in effect 10 cents a day, works very hard to be able to feed himself, but he is not able to meet the needs of his family members sufficiently.³⁵

It is safe to conclude that those seeking relief at the work camps were expected to perform hard labour in harsh conditions for wages that were insufficient to support themselves and their families.

Thus, like the British in their approach to famine relief in Ireland and India in the nineteenth century, the French administration (despite the sympathy that might have been felt by various local officials) was reluctant to provide free relief. The French colonial government's reasoning was that too much generosity might invite abuse and make the masses dependent. Thomas Adams suggests that in modern France, the idea of work was polarized into two kinds. On the one hand as a right or privilege of citizenship, and on the other as a punishment for hardened criminals and beggars.³⁶ According to him, in pre-Revolutionary France, the positive valuation of work was at the foundation of some of the charity institutions, and later in the late eighteenth century, became more pronounced in the demands for the "right to subsistence". The notion of work in the colonial work camps in Indochina, however, could not be interpreted as positive. In the context of the French *chantiers*, work was represented as punishment, and not as a right of citizenship. Temporary employment at the *chantiers* was more in line with the punitive measures

³⁵ Reydellet to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 64C, February 21, p. 3, 1906, RST 74.525.

³⁶ Thomas Adams, "The Provision of Work as Assistance and Correction in France, 1534-1848" in Donald Critchlow and Charles Parker, eds., *With Us Always: A History of Private Charity and Public Welfare*. New York and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Inc., 1998, pp. 55-76.

taken against criminals, rather than charitable measures to provide for famine victims.

Famine relief practices in Indochina demonstrated that welfare provision was not a right to be expected, but as 'benevolent' acts doled out at the discretion of the Resident Superior of Tonkin. Colonial relief policies and practices did not embody any of the spirit of the Enlightenment concept of assistance (*bienfaisance*), which connoted rational, efficient, and humane relief measures. While various local French administrators might have felt the need for more humanitarian measures, the overall bureaucratic apparatus gave priority to social control and budgetary constraints.

During the 1906 famine, provincial authorities (i.e. the French Residents or the Vietnamese Governors) had to ask continually for more assistance from the Resident Superior of Tonkin. In February 1906, Joseph Reydellet, the Resident of Ha Nam, wrote in a letter marked confidential that the relief fund the administration set up for his province was inadequate.³⁷ He wrote that the credit of 5,000 piastres³⁸ allotted for repairing the dikes was not enough to finish the job. The money ran out even though, as Reydellet mentioned, the workers were paid extremely low wages. Reydellet requested for an outright grant of 32,000 piastres at minimum, of which 20,000 would be used for dike repair and the rest to be distributed to the poor immediately. In addition, he asked for a reserve of 3,000 piastres to be distributed to the poor in March and April. Lastly, he requested 10,000 piastres be made available for small loans to villages

³⁷ Reydellet to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 64c, Feb 21, 1906, RST 74.525.

³⁸ The average exchange rate for the piastre was 2.45 francs in 1908, and 2.25 for 1914. Pham Cao Duong, *Vietnamese Peasant under French Colonialism*, Appendix V, p. 157.

on the mortgage of their harvests. The Resident of Ha Nam quickly pointed out that although his requests seemed high, they were not if one considered how much taxes the province remitted last year--277, 606 piastres, an increase of about 12,000 piastres from the year before. Remittances in ferry and market taxes also increased over the previous year. In fact, the aid (including the loan) Reydellet was requesting amounted to only sixteen percent of the main tax collected from Ha Nam. Finally, the Resident pointed out: "the same collection [in taxes] can be made this year if the province is presently helped out of this unpleasant crisis..."³⁹

Clearly, the Resident of Ha Nam did not believe that relief in the colony was a right of the people, but something to be negotiated based on the people's loyalty and worthiness (i.e. in terms of being tax payers). The onus of proof was on the famine victims, to show that they were indeed in extreme misery and deserving of relief. The excerpt below, taken from the report written in the spring of 1906 by Eugène-François Duvillier, the Resident of Ninh Binh, shows how Duvillier laboured to portray a picture of misery so that the Resident Superior would be moved to send additional aid. The Ninh Binh Resident wrote:

misery is so great and widespread that the 120,000 kg of rice that I am distributing among the unfortunates brings only temporary relief to the calamity that rages in the province. I have learned that a good number of the unfortunates, after having sold all that furnished their homes in order to procure something to appease their hunger, and possessing no other personal objects, have demolished their poor huts to sell the debris as firewood in the market.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

All the village bells, cult objects, [and]
flags of the pagoda are pawned or sold.

.....
If the administration does not come to
the assistance of the inhabitants again, I ask
myself how they will be able to wait for the
harvest. At the moment they eat for the most
part, roots, wild vegetables, bran, and herbs
chopped and cooked into a soup.⁴⁰

The reports from the provinces also noted the rise in crimes as a result of the crisis. It is interesting to note that the looting and robbing were portrayed as acts of desperation, and emphasis was placed on the fact that the thieves had no bad intention against the administration. Reporting about the rise in pillaging, Duvillier wrote: "The hungry (*les gens affamés*) are becoming more and more numerous and theft has multiplied in all the regions."⁴¹ He noted that crimes were being committed more frequently in Kim Son district, the only place that was able to obtain half of its harvest, and thus where one could still find some small amount of rice to steal. The Resident was quick to defend the people. He explained that in ordinary times the people here were very honest, but they did not hesitate to arm themselves and invade the rich households that still had rice. In one instance, the "affamés" entered a rich person's house, took thirty baskets of paddy, and so as not to be accused of stealing, they threw in the courtyard an "IOU" notice. Duvillier feared that once he ran out of rice to distribute to the poor, the incidence of crime would rise. The famine victims' overt disregard of the law, as with the food riots in Qing China, is a vivid demonstration of the people's expectation of their right to subsist--an expectation that was cultivated in

⁴⁰ Duvillier to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 18c, April 10, 1906, pp. 3-4, RST 74.525.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Confucian humanism and political philosophy of the pre-colonial days. Duvillier, in defending the looting, seemed to have shared this expectation of state responsibility for people's subsistence, which was after all a celebrated French republican ideal.

The 1906 famine showed that the people's expectation of a right to subsist was not shared by many of the colonial administrators, despite the centrality of this right within France's own Revolutionary history, which in turn formed the very basis for the French moral justification for colonizing Indochina. The internal governmental communications examined in this section reveal that even in a severe food crisis, aid would not be generously given. Famine victims needed to show that they were 'deserving' poor; those who were loyal and compliant to French rule, as opposed to those who were 'lazy' and living on state handouts or those who were a threat to the regime.

The Subsistence Crises of 1915-1917

The crisis of 1915-1917 is another example of a particularly difficult period for a number of Red River Delta provinces. Again flood and drought preceded the crisis, as they did in 1906, and caused serious damage to the harvests and land, leading to food shortages and mortality. The problem began in the summer of 1915 with forty-eight ruptures of various dikes, causing flooding in ten provinces along the Red River. Suffering the most damages were Ha Dong, Ha Nam, Nam Dinh and Ninh Binh. These four provinces lost seventy-nine percent of their tenth-month harvest, which amounted to approximately 3.4 million piastres.⁴² What

⁴² Peytavin, Assistant Engineer of Public Works, "La Crue du Fleuve Rouge et les inondations du Tonkin en 1915", *Bulletin économique de l'Indochine*, 119 (1916), p. 335.

made this period difficult for the people in the Red River Delta was that there had been a succession of natural disasters, allowing no time for the people to recover their losses. Prior to the flood of 1915, there had been major flooding in 1909, 1911, and again in 1913. The loss in harvest revenues for all of Northern Vietnam in 1913 was close to 5.8 million piastres.⁴³ Over half of the loss was borne by three Red River Delta provinces: Thai Binh, Ha Nam, and Nam Dinh, with Thai Binh losing one hundred percent of its harvest.⁴⁴

The flood of 1915 was followed by a drought in the spring of 1916, which prolonged and intensified the subsistence crisis. The Resident of Ninh Binh province, J. Bride, in a letter to the Resident Superior of Tonkin requesting more aid, stated that "poverty is greater this year [1915] than in 1913 and so it will be necessary to have two distributions [of aid]."⁴⁵ Bride reported that three out of seven districts (*huyen*) in his province were in extreme poverty and needed immediate help. The districts of Yen Hoa, Yen Mo, and Yen Khanh had lost most of their harvest the year before to the flood and now the drought was making their land uncultivable. The other districts fared better because they had other resources or advantages such as the forest, which provided wood or vegetation that could be sold, proximity to relief work camps, or a good irrigation system.⁴⁶ Perhaps Bride was a bit too optimistic in concluding that "the economic situation of the province, while not brilliant is far from

⁴³ Lefèvre, Chief Engineer of the Territorial District of Tonkin, "Inondations de 1913 dans le bassin du Fleuve Rouge et les bassins secondaires", *Bulletin économique de l'Indochine*, 105 (1913), p. 1040.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1008.

⁴⁵ J. Bride to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, Dec 17, 1915, RST75.790.

⁴⁶ Bride to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 26, Jan 30, 1916, RST75.790.

being desperate..."⁴⁷ On closer examination of his report, it appears that he mistakenly (or purposely) grouped Gia Vien with the other well off districts. His description of Gia Vien, however, would lead one to classify it along with the other three extremely poor districts:

In this district where all the land was submerged in the 10th month, only in the 5th month will there be a harvest; this year there will be a loss [of harvest] in half of the district.⁴⁸

Counting Gia Vien as a district in extreme need would tilt the scale, making over fifty percent of the districts as being desperately poor.

By the spring of 1916, the province of Ninh Binh still had not recovered from the subsistence crisis. In early May the *Tuan Phu*, Hoang Van Canh, reported to Bride that in the last three months 989 people died from starvation and related illnesses.⁴⁹ One third of the reported deaths was from Gia Khanh district, which Bride in his January report had classified as "*moins éprouvée*" (less afflicted). According to Canh's report, the above-mentioned Gia Vien district suffered the second largest number of mortality due to starvation, with 244 deaths.

The situation in early 1916 in Nam Dinh was similarly grave, although reports of mortality could not be found. The flood of 1915 had slowed the planting of the fifth month rice, and the drought was also having its effect, causing the Resident of Nam Dinh to request another grant of 4,000 piastres in February.⁵⁰ By May, the situation did not

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Hoang Van Canh, Tuan Phu of Ninh Binh to the Resident of Ninh Binh, May 3, 1916, RST 75.790.

⁵⁰ Resident of Nam Dinh to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, Feb 16, 1916; Tong Doc of Nam Dinh to the Resident of Nam Dinh, May 1, 1916, RST 75.790.

improve. The *Tong Doc* (Vietnamese provincial governor)⁵¹ of Nam Dinh explained that the population was in a transition period, with the old paddy stock depleted, while the new harvest was not yet available and thus he wrote: "I see that the population is suffering greatly from food shortages."⁵² The *Tong Doc* made another request for an additional aid of 2,000 piastres.

Despite the miserable state of many of the Red River Delta provinces and the large number of malnourished people and even deaths due to deprivation, the subsistence crisis of 1915-6 was not referred to as a famine in the official reports. It is unclear whether or not this was a result of a conscious effort on the part of the provincial Residents and the Resident Superior of Tonkin, to reserve the terms '*famine*' and '*affamés*' for more serious circumstances. Instead, the terms used to describe those suffering from the crisis were: "*la population nécessiteuse éprouvée par l'inondation*" (the needy population suffering from flooding), or "*les inondées*" (those flooded).

Government relief came mainly in the form of work camps. Soon after the flood of 1915, the Resident Superior of Tonkin, Le Gallen, wrote to the Residents of four northern provinces telling them of his plan to set up some work projects to help those suffering from the floods.⁵³ According to Le Gallen's letter, there were to be six to nine projects organized--the various sites would hire as few as 100 and as many as 2000 workers for approximately a month. The pay would be calculated by

⁵¹ In the early 20th century more populous provinces generally had a *Tong Doc* as its indigenous chief, while smaller provinces had a *Tuan Phu*. Eugène Teston and Maurice Percheron, *L'Indochine moderne. Encyclopédie administrative touristique, artistique et économique*. Paris: Librairie de France, 1931, p. 116.

⁵² Tong Doc of Nam Dinh to the Resident of Nam Dinh, May 1, 1916, RST 75.790.

⁵³ Le Gallen, Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 4580, Aug 22, 1915, RST 20.550 *a/s de l'Assistance par le travail en faveur des inondés*.

piecework or by day, although the rates varied. The *chantier de pierres à casser* in Chuc-Son, Ha Dong province, for example, would employ 1000 workers for one month, and would pay them sixty cents per cubic metre (presumably of rock they broke). At the *chantiers de terrassements* in Kien An Province, the workers would be paid twelve cents per cubic metre. At a mine, where 100 "robust coolies" were needed, the men would receive twenty-eight to thirty cents a day, women would be paid twenty cents, and children fifteen cents a day.

In this letter, the Resident Superior advised the provinces to inform the people that aid through work was the only assistance the administration was prepared to provide.⁵⁴ He wrote that aid to the indigent, the elderly, and the sick, must be taken care of within the village through communal organizations, without any intervention from the administration. The provincial Residents were told to inform the government of Tonkin of any special cases of poverty, which required the financial aid of the administration--he emphasized that only in cases where communal assistance was absolutely incapable of helping should the administration intervene. Le Gallen's instructions to the provinces clearly demonstrated the colonial government's refusal to be responsible for general welfare of the people, even during a subsistence crisis.

The severity of the subsistence crises led the provincial Residents to request that additional aid be distributed to those in need. Of the provinces afflicted by the 1915-1916 crises, Ninh Binh asked for and received the most help from the Resident Superior of Tonkin. From November 1915 to October 1917 Ninh Binh received 51, 991 piastres worth of relief, with some of the money destined for the *chantiers* and

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

some for distribution.⁵⁵ This was about forty-four percent of the total available funds. Ha Dong received about twenty-four percent, while Nam Dinh and Phu Ly received approximately fourteen and seven percent respectively. Without more information, one cannot be certain if the amount of aid received by the provinces reflected the relative severity of the food crises in the respective provinces. It might have been that Ninh Binh suffered the worst effects of the flood and drought, but it could also be that Bride, the Ninh Binh Resident, was more persistent than his colleagues in requesting additional relief. In Bride's perception, his province had suffered the most and longest than the other provinces. In the spring of 1917 when Ninh Binh was still in need of aid, Bride wrote in a letter apparently responding to some admonishment made by the Resident Superior:

...you wrote to me that it is inadmissible that the locals die of hunger. Permit me to remind you that I have already indicated to you about this situation in the report #498 of December 25; the situation would only therefore become worse...⁵⁶

Continuing his letter, Bride tried to demonstrate that the suffering in Ninh Binh was real without exaggeration:

During his last visit to Ninh Binh, the Bishop returning from a pastoral tour in the province, declared to me that he witnessed distressing situations. I know well that the heart of a Bishop must feel pity more easily than that of an administrator, but I myself can state that in certain corners of the province, poverty is at its greatest, and it is for this reason that I have

⁵⁵ Secours aux Inondés, Compte spécial avec la Banque de l'Indochine "Somme prélevée", December 18, 1917, RST 75.790.

⁵⁶ Bride to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 114, Apr 11, 1917, p. 1, RST 75.790.

not hesitated to solicit many times your
benevolence in aid of the population...⁵⁷

Bride stressed that he took "unprecedented precaution" with the relief money and gave only to the "*véritables miséreux*" (truly needy).

The money that the Resident Superior of Tonkin provided to the provinces on their requests came from a special fund set up to receive donations from various sources, such as fund-raising events in various provinces and cities throughout Indochina, and donations from individuals. More will be said about the donors, particularly, the non-European donors, in Chapter Five. What is relevant here is that emergency aid for the provinces came from the 117, 589 piastres that was raised mostly through private donations, and not from the cash reserve in the budget for Tonkin. Relief for this crisis was ad hoc, indicating that no mechanism had been institutionalized to render relief efficiently. As the next section on famine prevention shows, recommendations had been made in 1906 by the commission studying famine prevention to set up an emergency aid fund that could, without delay, be distributed to provinces in subsistence crises. Evidently, this fund was not in use by 1915.

Examining the actual distribution of relief reveals how the administration viewed their responsibility toward the welfare of the people and how they viewed the people themselves. In December 1915, the Resident of Ninh Binh, Bride, explained to the Resident Superior of Tonkin that distribution of aid should be carried out twice--once before and once after the Lunar New Year. He reasoned that if only one distribution were to take place before the new year, people would spend all of the money on games and alcohol.⁵⁸ Bride's patronizing attitude

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁸ Bride to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, Dec 17, 1915, RST 75.790.

toward the people's ability to save and manage their resources was not unusual in French and Vietnamese official writings, as it will become more evident later in this chapter.

Concern about abuse in relief distribution was prevalent in colonial government documents. Provincial authorities generally stressed that aid was being distributed by respected notables of the villages.⁵⁹ In a letter in February 1916, Bride described how aid had been distributed in his province and recommended ways to improve future distributions, emphasizing speed and removal of abuses.⁶⁰ According to Bride, he had been present at all the relief distributions thus far. Lists of recipients had been drawn up in advance by the local leaders and all those in need gathered at the designated area. The Resident had recommended that people leave their children at home, to save them from the exhaustion of the long wait in the heat, but because people were given aid according to the household size, the majority brought their children along to insure they received their fair share. The "*nécessiteux*" lined up behind the head of their Canton, and received aid from the Resident and European and Vietnamese functionaries. Although the process was long and involving, Bride seemed pleased that in one day he "came to the aid" of five thousand people.⁶¹ In May of the previous year 45,000 people were reported to have been in need. Presuming the number of those destitute remained more or less the same, Bride was able to distribute relief to only 1/9 of all the poor. There was also the problem of the arrival of a number of poor people whose names were not on the list, for one reason or

⁵⁹ Resident of Nam Dinh to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, February 16, 1916, RST 75.790.

⁶⁰ Bride to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 40, Feb 2, 1916, RST 75.790.

⁶¹ Bride to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 236, May 10, 1916, p. 2, RST 75.790.

another. Bride predicted that come the spring, the number of those in need would only increase and so he predicted it would be difficult to include everyone on a list.

Bride thus made some recommendations that he claimed would cut down on abuses and quicken the process of relief distribution. He proposed that the list of recipients be a numeric one, as opposed to names. Presumably this was meant to help speed up distribution. A numeric inventory (*état numérique*) would be established for each commune, with those in need grouped according to villages. He also proposed that aid be given only to the elderly, the sick, and women and children. For those in need who traveled about and who did not have a place of origin, a list would be drawn up separately at the time of distribution. He indicated a number of officials would be present, including the chief of the district involved, the *Tuan Phu* (or his representative), and a European representative of the Resident, presumably to avoid abuses.

As the sections above on the 1906 Famine and on the subsistence crisis of 1915-1917 show, the underlying emphasis in most official reports concerning subsistence crises was to justify relief given, no matter how meager and inadequate the aid or how needy the recipients were. Common in the approaches of the provincial administrators in asking for aid was to stress that they were asking for the minimum amount needed to help those in extreme deprivation, and that extra care was taken to minimize abuses. Even though subsistence crises were reported as frequent occurrences during the colonial period, the 1915-1917 crisis showed that there was still no institutionalized relief mechanism. Emergency aid consisted mainly of work camps, and for some dire

circumstances, grants or loans were given. Remarkably, much of the financial aid given to the provinces came from private donations, and not Tonkin's or Indochina's budgets. This further indicates that poor relief was not something to be expected from the French colonial rulers. Thus despite what Enlightenment thinkers, such as Montesquieu or members of the Revolutionary *Comité de Mendicité*, might have advocated about the state's obligation toward the welfare of its people, in colonial Vietnam famine relief was *de facto* an act of charity--doled out by individuals, private organizations, and government--and not a state responsibility.

The Commission on Famine Prevention

Faced with repeated episodes of severe famines in various regions, the colonial government, or at least some of its leaders, felt the need to address the problem of famine prevention. In 1906 a commission was created to examine suggestions from the provinces on measures to prevent subsistence crises. But like the other commissions formed in the late 1930s (which will be examined in Chapter Seven), few concrete measures actually resulted from this investigation.

During the height of the 1906 famine, Governor General Paul Beau sent a circular to the Residents Superior of Indochina, requesting that they consult with the provinces about ways to prepare for future relief activities. Beau suggested that the provinces could examine the proposal to restore the communal granaries that existed in the past. While some village granaries existed and operated in some capacity during the French colonial period, the French had dismantled regional and provincial granaries. This policy of closing the granaries was often explained on the grounds that local native elite were abusing the system, or that the system

had become dysfunctional. One suspects, however, that fear of local independence that such a granary system might afford, probably played an important role in the decision to destroy the granaries. A similar fear had led King Minh Mang to oppose the establishment of relief granaries (*xa thuong*) in the provinces in the 1820s and 1830s (see Chapter Three).⁶² Beau was therefore suggesting that the French administrators reassess the merit of the granary system. He wrote:

if experience has shown that these establishments [the granaries] did not render all the services that one should have the right to expect from them, it does not mean necessarily that the principles of the institution itself were bad.⁶³

Beau requested the provinces examine in addition to this idea more general issues of famine prevention and that indigenous authorities be consulted. In short, he wanted

to study together the measures to be planned...in order that the administration would not be taken unprepared, and in order for [the administration] to have a way to come to the aid of the unfortunates without any delay, with method, and by a process having the character of relief, and not creating an absolute unproductive cost for the regions.⁶⁴

Beau belonged to the group of colonial leaders whom Gilles de Gantès classified as republicans.⁶⁵ According to de Gantès, Beau shared

⁶² Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 162.

⁶³ Paul Beau, No. 512, May 29, 1906, RST 75.780 *Commission chargés d'étudier les mesures préventives contre les disettes après d'insuffisants du riz au Tonkin*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Gilles de Gantès, "Protectorate, Association, Reformism: The Roots of the Popular Front's Republican Policy in Indochina", in Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, eds., *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999, pp. 114-118.

with the other republican Governor Generals (such as de Lanessan, Sarraut, Varenne, and Brévié) an opposition to military power in running Indochina, a reputation for being a champion of native people, and a belief in France's 'civilizing' mission in the colonies.⁶⁶ As with the other republican politicians, Beau had to reconcile his liberalism with the reality of ruling a colony. Beau's concern for the Vietnamese people's welfare, and his request for a commission to study famine prevention reflected his republican principles. But just as his other 'achievements' such as education reform⁶⁷ illustrate, the convening of a famine-prevention commission had more symbolic than tangible value.

The interim Resident Superior of Tonkin, E. Groleau, wrote to the provinces about Beau's requests, and mentioned a few emergency measures that provincial officials could discuss with the indigenous leaders: a ban on exports, favouring imports, and the creation of a savings fund.⁶⁸ Groleau stressed that a ban on export should only be taken in extreme cases, since it would infringe on commercial interests which played an important part in the "general prosperity". Groleau stated that favouring imports, particularly inter-regional and inter-provincial imports of agricultural products and foodstuff, was in the interest of everyone and the right of each person. The Resident Superior then went on to discuss the particulars about creating a savings fund,

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁶⁷ Of the University of Indochina that Beau created, Gilles de Gantès wrote: "This educational reform amply illustrates the essence of the republican philosophy regarding the governing of colonies: educate the indigenous population up to a certain level only, and thus limit access to higher education. Although some opportunities were opened up to the natives, that was merely to prevent them taking matters into their own hands." *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁶⁸ Groleau, Resident of Tonkin to the provinces, No. 85, June 11, 1906, RST 75.780 *Commission chargés d'étudier les mesures préventives contre les disettes après d'insuffisants du riz au Tonkin.*

both in cash and in kind. According to him, both types of savings had their problems. The main problem with a cash savings fund was that in times of trouble money devalues and cannot buy as much as in normal times.⁶⁹ A savings in kind, however, would entail expenses in storage, surveillance, and maintenance. In addition, the waste (presumably from spoilage) would be great, as would be the need to control abuses.⁷⁰

In a follow-up letter a few days later, Groleau instructed the provinces to draw up a list of the various projects that could be undertaken within the limits of the available work force and budget to improve irrigation and drainage in their respective provinces.⁷¹ Groleau revealed that in 1896 studies were done to determine what was needed in terms of irrigation works in order to improve rice cultivation. Plans were established, but had been put on hold pending budget availability. The implication was that the Administration was only prepared to undertake low-cost projects to improve cultivation and to make the rural areas less vulnerable to natural disasters.

In his instructions to the provinces, Groleau had in fact circumscribed the limits of the administration's welfare provision. The foremost concern in famine relief, from the administration's point of view, was that it should not disrupt trade, particularly exports. This is similar to the British government's laissez-faire attitude in famine relief in India and Ireland. Free trade, colonialism's sacred cow that could not be disturbed, was believed to be the correction for the shortages. But as it was shown in the earlier section on the 1906 famine, it was not simply a shortage of

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

⁷¹ Groleau, No. 87, June 14, 1906, "a/s de travaux d'irrigation et d'assèchement", RST 75.780.

rice that was the problem, but high prices. If the colonial government did not want to infringe on commercial rights by controlling grain movement or prices, this limited its action to doling out aid to the poor. The heavy financial burden of adequate relief, however, was not something either the Resident Superior of Tonkin or the Governor General of Indochina were willing to take on.

The provincial administrators responded to Beau and Groleau's requests by convening a meeting with the indigenous leaders in their respective provinces. The result of the inquiry revealed as much about the diversity among the provincial officials as it did about the physical and socio-economic differences among the provinces. Some provincial Residents scrutinized the problem with thoroughness and care, some took it as an opportunity to rail against the "improvident" natives and "corrupt" notables, while others were brief and general in their reports. The Resident of Hai Duong province, Artus de Miribel, was an example of the first category. De Miribel's thirty-eight page typed report provided a detailed account of the province's history and present vulnerability to famines.⁷² His report revealed a deep understanding of the province's rural situation, as well as courage for criticizing both the French suppression of the granaries, and of the faulty credit system.

The provincial reports showed that fear of famine was limited to those provinces in the lowlands. In general, the responses reflected the geographical and climatic differences of the various regions in the North, as well as the differences in agricultural practices and population density. Sixteen of the twenty-seven provinces consulted by the Resident Superior

⁷² De Miribel to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, "Rapport sur les mesures à prendre pour mettre la population indigène à l'abri des maux occasionnés par les disettes", August 17, 1906, RST 75.780.

of Tonkin (i.e. 59.2 percent) supported the creation of either a reserve fund in cash or kind. Among the Delta provinces, 64.3 percent were in favour of re-establishing the granary system or a cash fund, while only 44.4 percent of the provinces in the highlands were interested in creating a reserve fund.

Many of the highland and midland provinces that rejected the idea of establishing some sort of emergency reserve did so on the basis that their own provinces were rarely threatened by subsistence crises. Lieutenant Colonel Georges Tétart, the military commander of Ha Giang, for example, pointed out that the only famine they experienced was in 1860 which was caused by wars of French conquest. Tétart reported that natural calamities usually were localized and rarely did the entire province suffer from floods, as did those in the Delta region.⁷³ In addition to being immune to floods and droughts, the highland provinces, as the Resident of Hoa Binh noted, had many resources, such as the forest. The people in the highlands grew a variety of crops as well as practiced animal husbandry, and thus were not dependent solely on rice cultivation like those in the Delta areas. Furthermore, Hoa Binh had only one tenth of the population of the Delta province of Nam Dinh, but had three times the amount of land.⁷⁴ Bac Kan was similarly endowed, and thus, as the Resident of Bac Kan reported, during the 1906 famine, refugees from famine provinces came there seeking food, and Bac Kan supplied much needed foodstuff to Hanoi.⁷⁵

⁷³ Tétart to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 219, July 17, 1906, RST 75.780.

⁷⁴ Raoul Patry, Resident of Hoa Binh to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, August 14, 1906, RST 75.780.

⁷⁵ Henri Lomet, Resident of Bac Kan to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, July 5, 1906, RST 75.780.

Among those provinces that supported the creation of an emergency reserve, approximately half were against the re-establishment of granaries throughout Northern Vietnam. Opponents of a granary system pointed out the cost involved with the management and supervision of a store of paddy. The Vietnamese notables from Yen Bay province, for example, concluded that a granary would entail too much money and too high a risk of destruction through fire, rain, or pests.⁷⁶ They suggested, instead, a reserve fund based on levy of three percent on native imports for the first year, and a two percent tax in subsequent years until the fund reached 5,000 piastres. Other provinces also suggested similar schemes. Notables in Lang Son suggested that two types of aid funds be established. The first was a commune level fund that would be based on an annual head tax of one cent for commune/village members and five cents for non-members, and a second fund organized at the provincial level which would constitute funds levied on land owners.⁷⁷

The report from Cao Bang was particularly revealing of the politics of the debate on the choice between a reserve in cash or one in kind.⁷⁸ Lieutenant Colonel de Salins, the Resident of Cao Bang, did not support the re-establishment of a granary. He chastised the indigenous notables for favouring the granaries: "[The notables] impregnated by ancient annamite customs, saw the re-constitution of the ancient granaries as the

⁷⁶ Resident of Yen Bay to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 838, June 27, 1906, RST 75.780.

⁷⁷ Resident of Lang Son to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 82A, June 29, 1906, RST 75.780.

⁷⁸ Guyot d'Asnières de Salins, Resident of Cao Bang, to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 176R, August 1, 1906, "A.S. de la création d'un Caisse de Prévoyance dans le 2e Territoire Militaire", RST 75.780.

only solution."⁷⁹ Later on in his report, however, de Salins revealed that the notables supported a reserve in kind rather than in cash out of concern for the average peasants who were already having trouble coming up with the cash to pay the regular taxes.⁸⁰ The notables feared that a reserve in cash, to which peasants would have to contribute, would be too burdensome for them. Thus, contrary to de Salins' assertion that the notables were rigid in their traditional thinking, they were in fact trying to represent the concerns of the peasants. De Salins saw many problems with trying to re-establish the granary system, not the least among them was the political issue:

[W]e have, rightly or wrongly, suppressed those [granaries] that existed when we arrived in Tonkin. The re-establishment of them would be a step backward and would give an argument to those who criticize our administration.⁸¹

De Salins' concern highlights the political dimension of famine prevention that sometimes underlies not only the motivating force, but also the types of measures adopted. Although a reserve in kind would have been less onerous on the peasants, it was not to be instituted because it could pose a threat to French colonial rule.

The discussion on famine prevention also revealed how French officials and Vietnamese mandarins viewed the peasants and village culture. The general portrait of the Vietnamese peasants that was presented in provincial reports was unflattering. Village leaders were usually depicted as corrupt, the masses apathetic, and village rituals and

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

cultural life as wasteful.⁸² French Residents and Vietnamese mandarins wrote under the assumption that the granaries of former times ceased to exist because of corruption perpetrated by the local managers, and that any future granaries would encounter similar problems. The Resident of Phu Tho claimed that organizing new granaries would require numerous rules and regulations "to prevent abuses that are inevitable with the locals."⁸³ Furthermore, the peasants were repeatedly criticized for their lack of understanding and appreciation of the idea of mutual help and savings. The military commander of Ha Giang, Lieutenant Colonel Tétart, declared that on the question of mutual aid, the Vietnamese society was not ready for it:

They [the indigenous people] do not understand the function of financial societies and can only see one thing--that they are obligated to contribute money without a certainty of receiving some of it...⁸⁴

Not only was it a matter of introducing the "modern" idea of mutual aid to the indigenous people, but as the Resident of Ha Nam believed, the Vietnamese people were selfish and lacked any sort of altruistic sentiment.⁸⁵ Although the various provincial Residents held unfavourable views of the Vietnamese peasants' ability to understand and to make mutual-aid societies work, they were certain that in time, the peasants

⁸² Hoang Trong Phu, Tong Doc of Bac Ninh, to the Resident of Bac Ninh, June 25, 1906, No. 227, RST 75.780; Do Van Tam, Assistant to Assistant of the Resident Superior of Tonkin, to the Chief Administrator of the Second Office, 13th day of the Fifth lunar month [June], 1906, RST 75.780.

⁸³ The Resident of Phu Tho to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 489, July 17, 1906, p. 6, RST 75.780.

⁸⁴ Tétart, Resident of Ha Giang to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 219, July 17, 1906, "A.S. des mesures à prendre en cas de disette", RST 75.780.

⁸⁵ Resident of Ha Nam to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 150, July [circa 28th], 1906, p. 3, RST 75.780.

would see the benefits of such organizations and would participate with enthusiasm.

The optimistic belief of some French officials that the Vietnamese could learn to appreciate the benefits of mutual aid reflected their Enlightenment notion of the perfectibility of humankind, an idea which provided the basis for their faith in France's 'civilizing' mission in Indochina. At the same time, their 'civilizing' mission necessitated the assumption that France's methods and ways were superior to those of the 'primitive' peoples of Indochina.⁸⁶ This perhaps explained why French writers who bemoaned the Vietnamese's lack of understanding of mutual aid, completely overlooked or ignored the mutual-help organizations already functioning in Vietnam at the time. There were even reports of granaries and mutual aid societies functioning in some villages, and yet these were dismissed without evidence as corrupt or unworkable.

The Resident of Phu Tho, for example, reported that in each village of his province there were provident societies known as *Tu ich* societies which collected cash or grain donations from village members. Each society's fund was safeguarded by four notables.⁸⁷ During a food shortage these funds would be distributed as loans to those in need at three percent interest, of which one percent interest would be given to the notables managing the fund. The Phu Tho Resident declared that unless there was some way to control all the activities of these societies, the funds were prone to squandering and abuse, benefiting only certain rich notables.

⁸⁶ Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*, p. 1.

⁸⁷ The Resident of Phu Tho to the Resident Superior of Tonkin, No. 489, July 17, 1906, p. 7, RST 75.780.

The granary of Sinh Lien village (of Thanh Oai district, Ha Dong province) is another example of an active mutual-aid organization among the local people. A report from the district explained how the granary functioned. According to this report, all landowners of the village would contribute one *thung* (equivalent of about half a litre) of paddy for every sao of rice field they cultivate.⁸⁸ The annual holding of this granary was 1550 *thung*, and every Second Lunar month it was distributed free of charge to those in need. Any surplus would be given out as loans. According to the report, the granary had been closed down because of abuses resulting from people not repaying loans made to them. In May 1906, when the report was written, the village was in the process of re-establishing the granary and the provincial authorities were asked to order those debtors to repay their loans in order that the granary would have a starting store.

French officials considered only French-led mutual societies to be examples of useful mutual-aid organizations. One such society was the *Dong Loi* providence and mutual aid society established in Kien An under the supervision of the former Resident of that province, Charles Prêtre. This society was cited in a number of reports as an example of a possible famine prevention measure.⁸⁹ According to the mayor of Hai Phong, the *Dong Loi* society was formed as a producers' mutual-aid organization that helped farmers get a good price for their produce. The mayor of Hai Phong suggested that each province establish similar societies to which the administration could entrust extra paddy as emergency provisions.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Report No. 878 of Thanh Oai district, May 19, 1906, Fonds de la province de Ha Dong 3484 *Disettes: Mesures préventives à prendre en cas des nouvelles disettes*, 1906.

⁸⁹ See for example the report from the Resident of Kien An, N. 384, August 3, 1906, P. 4, RST 75.780.

⁹⁰ Mayor of Hai Phong, No. 336Z, July 17, 1906, PP. 3-4, RST 75.780.

Similarly, the mayor of Hanoi, Félix Hausser, proposed that provident societies like those that existed in Algeria be set up in Indochina.⁹¹ Through his involvement with the Colonial Exposition at Marseille, Hausser learned about the success of Algeria's *Sociétés Indigènes de Prévoyance, de Prêts et de Secours Mutuels des Communes* (the Indigenous Societies for Providence, Loans and Mutual Aid of the Communes). Hausser pointed out that life was precarious for the average indigenous cultivator in Indochina. He suggested that perhaps the French had been "improvident" in suppressing the granaries when they first arrived in Indochina, without concerning themselves with replacing this institution, which on the whole had been providing people with a necessary service.⁹² Hausser was taken by the successes of the Algerian provident societies, which as of 1905, involved 463,000 members in 189 different societies. The Algerian Societies functioned by creating a reserve of cash or grains from membership dues and government grants. The fund was then used to provide loans to members who were impoverished either by illness or accidents. Hausser did not comment on how similar the Algerian *Sociétés indigènes de Prévoyance* were to mutual-aid societies already existing in Indochina at the time. Instead, Hausser stated that the Arabs are no more provident than the "Annamites", and there is nothing to say that in a short time the "Annamites" would understand and appreciate the importance of such mutual-aid organizations. Not only would this type of societies have

⁹¹ Hausser, Mayor of Hanoi, to the Governor General of Indochina, January 31, 1907, fonds de la province de Ha Dong, 3490 A/S de la *Création des sociétés indigènes de prévoyance de secours et de prêts mutuels agricoles dans les provinces du Tonkin*, 1907-11.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

practical value in helping prevent famines, but also a "moralizing" benefit, for it would help "habituate the Annamites to save."⁹³

The Commission's Recommendations

In August 1906 a Commission convened to examine the proposals and reports from the provinces. The Commission included Charles Prêtre as the president, and nine other members, of which two were indigenous representatives.⁹⁴ Commission members recommended that during a crisis, no restrictions should be placed on exports, even though one Vietnamese delegate voiced that exports had affected rice supply during the last subsistence crisis.⁹⁵ The Commission rejected the idea of establishing a granary system, but supported the creation of a reserve in cash; a centralized one for all of Northern Vietnam. It suggested the following to fund the emergency reserve: a tax increase of 1.5 percent in head and land taxes; an annual contribution from the budget for Tonkin of 100,000 piastres; a 50,000-piastres contribution from indirect taxes; a contribution of three percent of the income from provincial budgets; and *corvée* payments for railroad work to be made to the reserve. The Commission proposed that a central committee be set up to direct and manage the overall fund and the distribution of it during a crisis.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁴ The Commission members were: Prêtre (Assistant Inspector to the Resident Superior of Tonkin), Maron (delegate of the Chamber of Commerce in Hai Noi), Flambeau (delegate of the Chamber of Commerce in Hai Phong), Verdier (delegate of the Chamber of Agriculture of Tonkin), Lomet (Resident of Bac Kan), Simoni (Resident of Lang Son), Lemarie (Chief of Agricultural Services), Dao Trong Ky (former Tong Doc of Son Tay), Do Van Tam (Assistant to the Inspector of Civil Services), and Monnet (clerk acting as the Commission's secretary). "Process verbal des séances de la Commission chargée d'étudier les mesures le plus immédiatement efficaces pour parer aux disettes", August 27, 1906, RST 75.780.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

The Resident Superior of Tonkin, Groleau, balked at the idea of the budget for Tonkin having to contribute 100,000 annually.⁹⁶ He stated in a letter to Broni (the interim Governor General while Beau was on leave)⁹⁷ that he could not guarantee being able to contribute this much every year, thus he did not want the amount to be specified. Broni's response to the Commission report was similarly lukewarm.⁹⁸ He stated that it was up to the Resident Superior to decide whether or not a contribution of 100,000 from the Tonkin Budget was necessary, but that it appeared to him as being a heavy burden. Broni suggested that it might make more sense to rely on the reserve fund in case of emergency, as had been done in the past. Broni supported an increase in taxes, and a one-day corvée per village member at fifteen cents per day, but would not commit to the contribution of 50,000 piastres from indirect taxes. According to Broni, a mandatory contribution from all the provinces would not be appropriate, since some provinces were poor and already needing help to balance their budgets. He also did not think that a separate fund was necessary--a special account could be opened in the treasury with the Resident Superior in charge. Accordingly, a committee could be formed but its role would be consultative.

Although an emergency reserve fund of 50,000 piastres was eventually created within the budget for Tonkin in 1908, this famine-prevention measure was far from being the comprehensive plan of preparedness that Beau had envisioned in his initial request for an

⁹⁶ RST to the Governor General of Indochina, "Transmission du rapport et du procès-verbal de la Commission de la disette", No. 241, October 23, 1906, RST 75.780.

⁹⁷ Broni was the interim Governor General during the periods July 1-Dec 6, 1905; July 28, 1906-Jan 2, 1907.

⁹⁸ Governor General of Indochina to RST, "A.S. des moyens de remédier à la disette", No. 1397, November 23, 1906, RST 75.780.

inquiry. Between Groleau and Broni, the Commission's recommendations for famine prevention were whittled down to an increase in taxes, and an increase in *corvée*, without any financial commitment from the French administration. Even the idea of a separate and independent fund, directed and managed by a committee outside of the Tonkin government body, was dismissed. Thus, from the point of view of the ordinary peasants, famine relief measures amounted to an increase in tax and *corvée* burden, with little guarantee that this money would be made available to them when they needed it.

As an indication of the inadequacy of the emergency reserve fund as a famine-prevention measure, the reserve was never mentioned during the 1915-7 subsistence crisis; instead government aid came from private donations (see the above section). Furthermore, subsequent administrators made similar attempts to study ways to prevent famine. Like the famine-prevention study of 1906, the later investigations and commissioned studies were usually initiated on the heel of a major food crisis, when public opinion in France demanded some sort of humanitarian gestures. More importantly, fear of social unrest and the growing Vietnamese nationalist organizations after 1930 prompted successive colonial administrations to, if not institute, at least make gestures toward agrarian reforms and improvement.⁹⁹ Other commissioned studies also resulted in no substantial changes or improvement for the people in need. Governor General Pasquier's attempt to set up an assistance fund (*caisses de secours*) in 1930 is one

⁹⁹ Panivong Norindr, "The Popular Front's Colonial Policies in Indochina: Reassessing the Popular Front's 'Colonial Altruiste'", in Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, eds., *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front*. p. 239.

such example.¹⁰⁰ The provinces of Tonkin were polled for their opinions and a commission was set up to study the question on July 9, 1930. The result was that the commission proposed setting up one *caisse de secours* for all of Tonkin. Interestingly no mention was ever made of a similar fund set up in 1906.

Conclusion

Examination of the 1906 famine, the subsistence crisis of 1915-1917, and the famine prevention commission reveals a persistent tension between the humanitarian spirit of the 'civilizing' mission, and the French conceptualization of poverty. This tension was further compounded by racial biases and by the colonization agenda. Despite what individual French administrators might have felt with regard to poor relief, the colonial milieu in which they functioned did not afford the administration to assume responsibility for the general welfare of the colonized people. It was understood among provincial and local administrators that aid to the most needy during times of crisis would be given at the discretion of the government. In colonial Vietnam the right to subsist could not be assumed, as the rhetoric of the French Revolution claimed to have won for French people. Even in post-Revolutionary France this right was not an uncontested gain for the French poor. Although republican-minded administrators such as Governor General Beau saw an urgent need to improve the vulnerability of the Indochinese peasants, he was unable to enact a comprehensive plan to prevent famine as he had envisioned. Bureaucratic inertia contributed in part to the lackluster result of the 1906

¹⁰⁰ RST 74.060 *Organisation des caisses de secours aux populations indigènes en cas de sinistres ou de calamités publiques*, 1930-1937.

Commission on Famine Prevention. Budgetary concerns and racial assumptions about natives' penchant for corruption and improvidence also quashed Beau's idea of reconstituting communal granaries.

Various attempts continued to be made by subsequent administrators to prevent famine and help poor peasants gain a secure livelihood. These attempts, however, met a similar fate as the Commission on Famine Prevention in 1906. Moreover, policies which had a direct and negative impact on the poor, such as the head tax, continued unmodified. Three decades later, as the Socialist Marius Moutet became the Minister of Colonies for the Popular Front government, he was faced once again with the problem of famine and poverty in the colonies (see Chapter Seven). Moutet admonished the colonies for their poor record in famine prevention and poor relief, and reminded the colonial administrators of France's 'civilizing' mission. Moutet stated that improving the lives of the people was a humanitarian duty, and an "obligation tacitly accepted by France toward the populations when she assumed their tutelage."¹⁰¹ In other words, one of the justifications for French colonialism, within the official French rhetoric, was to improve the lives of the poor. As later chapters will show, in the 1930s and 1940s some anti-colonialist writers of Northern Vietnam were preoccupied with articulating poverty as a social 'problem'. In doing so, the writers were attacking colonial rule within its own rhetoric and criteria.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Chapter 5: Teaching Responsibility: Elite Vietnamese Thinking on Poverty and Charity

This chapter will examine the discussions on poverty and charity as they appeared in three politically conservative Northern Vietnamese publications of the 1920s and 1930s. In the early twentieth century, under colonial rule, concerns for the poor reflected a more politically sensitive issue, that of national survival and independence. Writings on charity and poverty in the newspapers examined here consciously linked philanthropy with patriotism. According to these journalists, fulfilling one's responsibility toward the poor was a new and 'modern' duty of citizenship. The force of their argument was that poor relief was critical to the building of a *van minh* (civilized) society/nation, and thus critical to national survival.

According to David Marr, for many early twentieth-century Vietnamese intellectuals, a *van minh* society generally meant a "strong, free, and independent nation-state."¹ Marr further explains that by the 1920s Vietnamese intellectuals generally considered a civilized society as encompassing, among other qualities:

mastery over nature, a spirit of civic responsibility, full development of the individual's mental, physical, and moral faculties, and the ability of Vietnamese to stand proud among the other peoples of the world.²

The term was often used in the newspapers of 1920s and 1930s to describe modern Western societies: *nuoc van minh ben Thai-tay* (civilized countries in the West), or *nuoc van minh tien-tien* (advanced civilized countries). In this and other usage, such as *phong trao van minh* (civilizing movement), the term *van minh* connoted notions of modernity. The present-day terms for modern, which

¹ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981, p. 138.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

are *hien dai*, and *can dai*, were not commonly used. Instead, terms such as *tien bo* (progress), and *duy tan* (modernization) were employed in the early twentieth century to connote the new and modern. *Van minh*, therefore, encapsulated more than its English translation of civilized or civilization. There was an implied national independence (as Marr points out), as well as an association with industrialized modern nation-states such as those in Western Europe, the United States and Japan.

The discourse on seemingly apolitical issues of poor relief and charity, reflected not so much the state of philanthropy in Vietnam, but the anxieties and concerns of non-revolutionary, cautiously anti-colonial intellectuals about the future of their country, and their roles as leaders in it. As discussed in Chapter Two, Partha Chatterjee's work shows how Bengalese nationalists claimed sovereignty within the spiritual/cultural domain while ceding power to British colonialists in the material/political realm. In a similar fashion, the elite Vietnamese's writings on charity betrayed an attempt to construct and assert its moral authority vis-à-vis the mass of poor people. Stripped of its traditional legitimacy endowed by the Vietnamese monarchy, and barred from any significant political involvement by colonial rule, the native elite saw an opportunity in poor relief to provide guidance and leadership. Like the Bengalese nationalists who were searching to create a modern, but not Westernized, national culture, Vietnamese intellectuals' offering to the problem of poverty was not a purely Westernized one. Although the emphasis was put on the new and 'modern' aspect of building charitable organizations and helping the poor, underscoring this was a call for Confucian self-cultivation--teaching the elite how to be responsible for those 'below' them. In other words, the Northern Vietnamese intellectuals, although steeped in Western thoughts about poor relief,

and writing in newspapers that were created by French colonial rulers, were providing a 'hybridized' response to the problem of poverty.

Newspaper Sources

The main source for this chapter are three important publications of Northern Vietnam: *Trung Bac tan van* (Central and Northern news, 1915-1945), *Nam Phong tap chi* (Southern wind review, 1917-1934), and *Bao Dong Phap* (Indochina-France news, 1925-1945). Emerging early in the history of Vietnamese journalism, all three publications were intimately tied to the French colonial state in various degrees, and consequently views expressed in these publications were politically conservative, uncritical of French colonial policies, and anti-revolutionary. *Nam Phong* was in fact a creation of Governor General Albert Sarraut as part of his endeavor to convince the Northern neo-traditional elite of the merits of the French 'civilizing' mission.³ Both *Nam Phong* and *Trung Bac tan van* received government subsidies. In 1931 *Nam Phong* received 500 piastres a month from the colonial state while *Trung Bac tan van* and its sister journal *Hoc Bao* (previously *Dong Duong tap chi*) received 12,000 piastres.⁴ *Bao Dong Phap* was the Vietnamese offspring of the French language *France-Indochine* paper. While these publications were sponsored by the state and espoused pro-French sentiments, they are still valuable sources, for they provide perspectives from the politically-conservative elite class of Northern Vietnam. Being supported by the state also meant that these publications had the financial and political backing for a long life. *Nam Phong* was published for seventeen

³ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 121.

⁴ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, p. 49, footnote 72.

years while *Trung Bac tan van* and *Bao Dong Phap*⁵ remained in business for thirty and twenty years respectively, earning *Trung Bac tan van*, in David Marr's words, "the dubious distinction of being the longest surviving *quoc ngu* daily of the colonial period."⁶

Trung Bac tan van was created in 1915 by French entrepreneur F. H. Schneider, who also published *Dong Duong tap chi* (Indochina review) and the Saigon-based *Luc Tinh tan van* (News from the Six Provinces). In 1919 Schneider retired and sold *Trung Bac tan van* along with his publishing house to Nguyen Van Vinh.⁷ *Trung Bac tan van* went from being a weekly paper to the first daily in the North, and by the early 1920s had a daily circulation of about six thousand.⁸ As a daily newspaper, *Trung Bac tan van* covered international and national news, as well as publishing government decrees and official communications. It also carried daily columns on various aspects of life in

⁵ *Bao Dong Phap* has been in large part ignored by historians of Vietnam, and of historians of Vietnamese journalism. Scant information is available in secondary literature about this publication. Of the information available, some discrepancies exist. Huynh Van Tong, for example, wrote that *Bao Dong Phap* ceased publication in 1932 and he also listed it as one of eight apolitical papers of Southern Vietnam. Contrary to Tong's assertion, *Bao Dong Phap* was published in the North with its editor's office located in Hanoi at 53 Paul Bert Street in 1925. Although the set of microfilm of *Bao Dong Phap*, which I obtained from the Center for Research Libraries (Chicago), went up to only 1932, the microfilm header indicates that the paper was published until 1945. Nguyen Van Chuoc confirmed this, as he noted that when the Japanese took over Indochina in 1940, two dailies existed in the North: *Bao Dong Phap* and *Tin moi*. Oddly, *Trung Bac tan van*, which was published in Hanoi until 1945, was not mentioned by Chuoc. Unfortunately, the same error as Huynh Van Tong's regarding *Bao Dong Phap* was duplicated in a suspiciously similar presentation of pre-World War One journalism by Dang Van Nham. Dang Van Nham's book, bearing almost the same title as Huynh Van Tong's work, was published later and is less scholarly than Tong's. Huynh Van Tong, *Lich su bao chi Viet Nam tu khoi thuy den nam 1945* [History of Vietnamese newspapers and journals from the beginning to 1945], Ho Chi Minh city: Dai Hoc Mo [The Open University], 1994, p. 89; Nguyen Van Chuoc, *Luoc su bao chi Viet Nam* [An abridged history of Vietnamese newspapers], Saigon: Nam Son, 1975, p. 55; Dang Van Nham, *Lich su bao chi Viet Nam tu khoi thuy den hien tai, 1861-1999* [History of Vietnamese newspapers and journals from the beginning to the present], California: Vietnam Van Hien, 1999, p. 137.

⁶ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, p. 164.

⁷ Hong Chuong, *Tim hieu lich su bao chi Viet Nam* [Understanding the history of Vietnamese newspapers and journals] Hanoi: Sach Giao Khoa Mac-Le-nin, 1987, p. 66.

⁸ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 121.

Vietnam, articles on history, literature, and translations of Chinese and Western fiction.

Nguyen Van Vinh, an autodidactic product of the Hanoi school of translators, represented a new type of educated elite in colonial Vietnam. In 1907 Vinh enthusiastically participated in the *Donh Kinh nghia thuc* (Tonkin free school), taking charge of the French literature classes.⁹ Unlike the anti-colonial Confucian scholars such as Phan Boi Chau or Phan Chu Trinh, who led the Reform Movement that spawned the Tonkin Free School, Vinh had no classical training.¹⁰ Vinh was "intoxicated" with the West and its culture, and was deeply contemptuous of Confucian philosophy that had become embedded in Vietnamese society.¹¹ An ardent believer in Social Darwinism, Vinh championed cultural reform and Westernization as solutions for national survival. In a series of columns entitled "Xet tat minh" (Examining our defects) published in *Dong Duong tap chi*, for example, Vinh blamed Vietnam's lack of progress on various behaviours of the Vietnamese people, such as being superstitious, holding contempt for physical labour, and having a penchant for gambling and gossiping.¹²

Trung Bac tan van, though a daily focusing mainly on news, ran regular columns on socio-cultural issues. These columns often reflected pro-Western views similar to those of Nguyen Van Vinh, the owner of the newspaper. *Trung Bac tan van*'s columnists praised the benefits of French tutelage and Western cultural influence in helping Vietnam move toward modernization. Among the regular writers for *Trung Bac tan van* were famous scholars and writers such as

⁹ Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien: van hoc hien dai 1862-1945*, [The new and concise history of Vietnam's Literature], vol. III. Saigon: Quoc hoc tung thu, 1965, p. 111.

¹⁰ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 20.

¹¹ Nguyen Viet Chuoc, *Luoc su bao chi Viet Nam*, p. 93.

¹² Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III, p. 112.

Hoang Tang Bi, Pham Duy Ton, Nguyen Do Muc, Pham Quynh, Nguyen Ba Trac, Pham Huy Luc, Phan Ke Binh, Bui Huy Cuong, and Nguyen Van Luan.¹³ The last of these writers, Nguyen Van Luan, took over *Trung Bac tan van* when Vinh died in 1936.¹⁴

There were many cross-overs between *Trung Bac tan van* and the monthly journal, *Nam Phong*. Both publications shared writers (such as Nguyen Ba Trac, and Phan Ke Binh), as well as similar admiration for Western culture, and objectives in helping Vietnam modernize through cultural reform. *Nam Phong's* editor, Pham Quynh (who had earlier written for *Trung Bac tan van*), took it as his duty to guide the nation "from the shore of tradition to the shore of modernity".¹⁵ Similarly influenced by Social Darwinism as Nguyen Van Vinh, Pham Quynh believed that Vietnamese society was backward, and "that many of its customs and mores bordered on the barbaric."¹⁶ According to him, before Vietnam "could be considered mature enough for self-rule, the Vietnamese would have to undergo a thoroughgoing cultural transformation."¹⁷ In addition to its powerful creator, Governor General Sarraut, *Nam Phong* was managed by Louis Marty, the director of the Political Affairs and General Security Service in Indochina--the dreaded *Sûreté*. Despite the pro-French stance and status as an official publication, few historians would deny the enormous influence *Nam Phong* played in Vietnam's cultural and political histories. Huynh Van Tong, a specialist on Vietnamese journalism, reluctantly noted *Nam Phong's* importance:

Although the political purpose of the journal *Nam Phong* was overly obvious, we still must recognize that the paper in some aspects contributed very ably

¹³ Hong Chuong, *Tim hieu lich su bao chi Viet Nam*, p. 63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p.48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

to the development of a foundation for literature in our country.¹⁸

Bao Dong Phap, a Hanoi weekly turned daily paper, is rarely mentioned or cited by historians of Vietnamese history, or of Vietnamese journalism. *Bao Dong Phap* was akin to *Trung Bac tan van* in its focus on news, yet without the influence of the famous Nguyen Van Vinh, or his highly-respected staff of scholar-writers. Created in 1925, *Bao Dong Phap's* first managing director was C. Mazet, followed in the late 1920s by Hardonin Delaforge, and then by Ngo Van Phu in May 1932. In its first issue, the editor stated that *Bao Dong Phap's* mandate was to help Indochina prosper by educating the Vietnamese reading public and by acting as a liaison between the colonial state and the people.¹⁹ The four-page *Bao Dong Phap* featured news items from Europe, the East and Indochina, with the front page reserved for coverage of international and local political and diplomatic events. Similar to the layout of *Trung Bac tan van*, every issue of *Bao Dong Phap* had a section on the front page featuring a commentary column. The tone of the column tended to be didactic, with topics ranging from education, to Vietnamese people's trading practices, to high-interest loans, to health and to the problem of begging. The quality of *Bao Dong Phap* between 1925-1932 (the period I was able to examine) was uneven. At times the paper thrived on tabloid-style, sensational articles, while other times it carried lively exchanges among regular contributors, and between writers and readers on important issues such as women's rights and citizens' duty toward the poor.²⁰ Thus, while some historians might dismiss *Bao Dong Phap* as a mere

¹⁸ Huynh Van Tong, *Lich su bao chi Viet Nam tu khoi thuy den nam 1945*, p. 59.

¹⁹ *Bao Dong Phap*, "Kinh cao quoc-dan" [Respectfully addressing the people], *Bao Dong Phap*, Jan 8, 1924, p. 1.

²⁰ The debate on women was particularly popular in July-August 1929, while a discussion on charity took place in January-February 1928 and again in the Spring and Summer of 1932, *Bao Dong Phap*.

Vietnamese-language version of *La France-Indochine*²¹, the paper clearly provided space for less-well known Vietnamese writers and even readers to express their views. Being less high-brow than scholarly publications such as *Nam Phong*, *Bao Dong Phap* perhaps reached or reflected the views of a larger section of the reading public. *Bao Dong Phap* complements *Trung Bac tan van* and *Nam Phong* in providing a view of politically conservative and moderate writers on the issue of charity and society's responsibility toward the poor.

The *Quoc-Ngu* Publication Boom

The emergence of newspapers and journals published in romanized Vietnamese began in 1865, with the French-sponsored paper, *Gia Dinh bao* (Gia Dinh report).²² The publishing boom of newspapers, journals, and books owed much to the new *quoc ngu* (national script) writing system, which was easier to learn and use. *Quoc ngu*, developed by Jesuit missionary Alexander de Rhodes in the mid-seventeenth century, was wholeheartedly encouraged by the colonial government in hopes that by supplanting the former writing system based on Chinese characters with *quoc ngu*, Vietnamese literati would be drawn away from Chinese cultural influences.²³ *Quoc ngu*, however, played an important unintended part in disseminating nationalist sentiments as well as fueling a boom in newspaper and book publication.

The rapid growth of journalism and popularity of *quoc ngu* can be illustrated with the emergence of *quoc ngu* newspapers. One of the first *quoc ngu* publications in North Vietnam, *Dang co tung bao* (Old lantern miscellany)²⁴

²¹ Such as the view of Huynh Van Tong, *Lich su bao chi Viet Nam*, p. 89.

²² Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976, p. 78.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ I follow William Duiker's translation of this newspaper title found on page 112 of *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976.

had a short life span, from 1907-1909. Its editor, Nguyen Van Vinh, had to close shop because there were not enough *quoc ngu* readers to sustain it. Three years later, however, readership had grown to the extent that when Nguyen Van Vinh returned from working in Saigon, he began editing what was to become a highly popular and successful newspaper, *Dong Duong tap chi*.²⁵ Half a century after the first *quoc ngu* newspaper was published in Saigon, a popular paper, *Trung lap bao* (Neutral news) could boast of an average daily circulation of 15,000.²⁶ By the mid-1930s nine of the most popular *quoc ngu* periodicals had a combined circulation of 80,000 copies.²⁷

Quoting circulation figures may be misleading. On the one hand, subscriptions to newspapers and journals, particularly the pro-French ones, were sometimes forced on Vietnamese public figures.²⁸ On the other hand, circulation figures do not reflect the actual number of people who had access to the publications. For example, the figure does not count the number of readers who shared a periodical (e.g. family members, co-workers), and the illiterate who might have had the papers read to them.²⁹

Through this new medium, readers and listeners were being taken "beyond the world of face-to-face contact" and connecting to a wider community.³⁰ With regard to poor relief, the flourishing print media was changing the scope of charity as well as how philanthropic activities and organizations were being envisioned and organized. In the articles and advertisements on

²⁵ Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III, p. 97.

²⁶ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, p. 47

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 286, footnote 20.

²⁹ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, pp. 46-47.

³⁰ Shawn McHale, "Printing and Power: Vietnamese Debates over Women's Place in Society, 1918-1934", K. W. Taylor and John Whitmore, eds., *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 175.

charitable events, readers were being asked to help people in other regions, places that they likely had never visited. Just as charity activities became more impersonal, recognition for generosity also had to be reconfigured, since rewards in the form of ranks and titles had become virtually obsolete and useless under French colonial rule. Donors had to be satisfied with less tangible and less immediate recognition for their charity--such as the prestige that might come with being involved in benevolent organizations, being seen attending charitable events, or having their names mentioned in a list of donors in a newspaper.

Newspapers served as a vehicle to raise awareness of the crises and social problems afflicting the country, in addition to publicizing charity events. People learned about catastrophes elsewhere through newspaper reports. The *Hop phu*, a commercial and industrial society, for example, made a request to the Mayor of Hai Phong for permission to start fund-raising for flood victims of Hung Yen and Bac Ninh provinces. Tran Ngoc Bich, the managing director of this society, stated that members of the society were moved when they read about the misery of their compatriots and wanted to help.³¹ Another example of how newspapers served as vehicles for raising awareness of events occurring beyond readers' immediate town/village can be seen in this following article in *Bao Dong Phap*. The female writer of this article was urging Northern readers to help victims of a typhoon in the Central region. She wrote:

Although the long distance does not allow us to witness [the disaster], following the telegrams and news published by the newspapers we are made sufficiently clear about the present suffering of the several tens of thousands of compatriots.³²

³¹ Bich to Resident Mayor of Hai Phong, September 1923, *Souscription pour les inondés au Tonkin* 1923, Fonds de la Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin (RST) 48.798, National Archives Number One of Vietnam, Hanoi.

³² Nguyen Thi Diem Binh, "Doi voi nan dân phía Nam-Trung-Ky" [With Regard to the victims in the South Central region], *Bao Dong Phap*, May 23-24, 1932, p. 1.

Since colonial censorship laws prohibited discussions on weighty political matters such as Vietnam's loss of independence, the writings on charity were more than met the eye. In contrast to the South where journalism had an earlier start and where at least French-language newspapers had freedom of the press, Northern and Central regions experienced rigorous press censorship.³³ Each Vietnamese-language issue "had to be submitted in French translation to the official censor 48 hours before going to print, and the discussion of politics was forbidden."³⁴ In addition to remaining apolitical, and pro-French, the presses in the Northern and Central regions had to be careful not to offend the Vietnamese court in Hue, and the mandarins. According to Hue Tam Ho Tai, these restrictions in Northern and Central Vietnam made it "impossible to use journalism as a tool for political discourse there."³⁵ Nevertheless, in the discourse on charity, readers could encounter thinly disguised concerns for national survival, a political topic *par excellence*.

Nation and Society: New Conceptualizations

Since the new print media was widening the scope of charity, poor-relief campaigns needed to convince readers of their close relationship to, and thus responsibility for, strangers in need. Hence the theme of ethnic solidarity, based on a common Vietnamese ancestry, dominated the writings on charity in the 1920s and 1930s. Born out of necessity, this link between charity and ethnic

³³ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*. pp. 120-121.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

cohesion, however, became the forum for discussion about how to build a *van minh* society, and associated concerns about national survival. This section will provide some examples of philanthropic campaigns and examine the rhetoric employed in them.

Trung Bac tan van and *Bao Dong Phap*, played important roles in raising awareness about poverty and in promoting philanthropic activities. *Bao Dong Phap*, for example, was actively involved in promoting fund-raising events for flood victims of Thanh Hoa province (in Central Vietnam) in 1928.³⁶ From January until March 1928, *Bao Dong Phap* reported on various fund-raising events being organized in Northern Vietnam to help Thanh Hoa residents. In Hon-Gai, for instance, a benefit play was staged, while in Hue a fundraising movie collected 122.19 piastres after expenses.³⁷ In Tuyen Quang, a northern province in Northern Vietnam, a soccer match and a variety show that ran two evenings raised a net of 268.65 piastres for Thanh Hoa flood victims.³⁸ In Hue a group of young women wrote a letter to Madame Dam Phuong, the head of the *Hoi nu-cong hoc* (Association for the study of domestic arts), an organization that reinforced the role of women within the households,³⁹ asking her to organize a benefit bicycle race.⁴⁰ The proposal was that the race would take place around Mount Ngu Binh, with female students from the city involved. The anonymous reporter of the young women's attempt praised them for trying to promote both physical exercise for women, and charity work. The writer expressed regrets that

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ "Giup nan dan Thanh-Hoa" [Helping the victims of Thanh Hoa], *Bao Dong Phap*, January 12, 1928, p. 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ "Giup nan dan Thanh-Hoa" [Helping the victims of Thanh Hoa], *Bao Dong Phap*, January 19, 1928, p. 1.

³⁹ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 199.

⁴⁰ "Giup nan dan Thanh-Hoa", *Bao Dong Phap*, January 12, 1928, p. 1.

Dam Phuong was opposed to the idea on the ground that such an event was not in line with the association's approach. Enthusiasm surrounding philanthropy was stoked by the link between it and trendy activities, such as sport. Charity events, therefore, were linked to modernity not only in the promotional rhetoric, but also in the events themselves, such as the screening of films, soccer games, and bicycle races.

A larger and more involving benefit event was being organized in Hanoi. Under the initiative and leadership of Madame Bach Yen, a group of elite women organized a benefit fair.⁴¹ Among the attendees at their first organization meeting was the wife of publisher/official Pham Quynh.⁴² *Bao Dong Phap* was instrumental in promoting the fair, by continually publishing announcements and readers' letters supporting the women's fair, which was scheduled to take place on March 6th, approximately two months from the time the women first began organizing it. In late January, many issues of *Bao Dong Phap* carried lists of donors and their contributions to the women's benefit fair. Many donated money, while others donated goods such as perfume, books and jewelry to be sold at the fair. The fair was an apparent success in that it raised 3,248.96 piastres after expenses for Thanh Hoa.

Although a financial success, the women's philanthropic endeavour did not take place without controversy. It was the first or one of the first major events organized by women in an extensively public manner, both in its promotion and communication. Letters and articles from readers and from the organizing committee suggested that the exclusively female initiative was seen as rather bold and even provocative by some. A female reader from Nam Dinh sent a letter praising Bach Yen *et al* for their work, but also offered some advice. Her

⁴¹ "Giup nan dan Thanh-Hao", *Bao Dong Phap*, January 12, 1928, p. 1.

⁴² "Giup nan dan Thanh-Hoa", *Bao Dong Phap*, January 17, 1928, p. 1.

first advice was to ignore criticisms from those who might be negative about the women's fair. Secondly, she suggested that the organizing committee ask for opinions and advice from the men. She stated that since organizing events like this was new to women, they should not hesitate to make an appeal through the newspapers asking for male input. In this way, the women would avoid being criticized for being pretentious (*tu phu*).⁴³ In response, the organization committee admitted that their endeavour was indeed a daring one, and one in which they must do well, or else risk damaging the honour of the women of Hanoi.⁴⁴

Another fundraising campaign promoted by *Bao Dong Phap* took place in the summer of 1931, this time for the provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh in Central Vietnam. Less than a year prior to this poor-relief campaign, widespread anti-colonial peasant rebellion had taken place in these two provinces. Brutal French retaliation and repression which followed the mass revolt and the "Nghe-Tinh soviet" movement,⁴⁵ exacerbated the harsh economic situation which had fueled discontent in the first place. The collaborationist newspapers, however, emphasized only physical geography and population pressure as causes of poverty in Nghe An and Ha Tinh. *Bao Dong Phap*, for example, reported that drought in the last two years had devastated these two provinces, which in ordinary times were already overpopulated and had depleted soil.⁴⁶ The colonial government granted permission for the organization of a "*Hoi-dong cuu-te*" (relief council) for the people of Nghe-Tinh.⁴⁷ The relief council was led by the

⁴³ Do-Thi-Kim-Ngan, "Mot buc thu bieu-tinh" [A letter expressing sentiments], *Bao Dong Phap*, January 21, 1928, p. 2.

⁴⁴ "Giup nan-dan Thanh-Hoa", *Bao Dong Phap*, January 28, 1928, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, p. 380.

⁴⁶ Hong-Linh, "Tinh-hinh doi kem o Nghe-Tinh: Doi voi nan-dan Nghe Tinh chung ta nen nhu the nao?" [The situation in Nghe-Tinh: What should we do with regard to the Nghe Tinh victims?], *Bao Dong Phap*, August 10, 1931, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Nghe-Tinh is the Vietnamese short-hand for referring to both Nghe An and Ha Tinh provinces.

Governor of Ha Dong province Hoang Trong Phu and members of the *Hoi khai-tri tien-duc* (in Western terms, the Association for intellectual and moral formation for the Annamites, commonly known by its French acronym: AFIMA), an elite organization affiliated with Pham Quynh's journal, *Nam Phong*.⁴⁸ The relief council's strategy was to canvass donations throughout Northern Vietnam. *Bao Dong Phap* helped in promoting this campaign as well as acting as one of the collectors for donations. Involvement in charitable activities provided participants with prestige, allowed them to appear as benevolent leaders in society. This was an important opportunity, since under French colonialism, the collaborating elite's moral leadership was seriously challenged.

The rhetoric that dominated the elite's discourse on charity was ethnic solidarity. Virtually ubiquitous, the notion of a common Vietnamese ancestry was invoked to convince readers of their connection and thus responsibility to their compatriots in need. Even though Vietnam was and still is inhabited by many different ethnic groups, newspaper writers in the early twentieth century generally did not acknowledge this diversity, but instead addressed only the majority Kinh (or Viet) group. The following examples were typical of articles appealing for people to participate in charitable activities. In the summer of 1924 a dike burst, flooding nine or ten districts in Northern Vietnam. An article in *Trung Bac tan van* encouraged readers to donate or organize charitable activities to help the flood victims. The writer stated that the victims were not "strangers unrelated to us" (*nguai dung nuoc la*), but were:

⁴⁸ H. K. Q., "Ky hoi-dong cua uy-ban cuu-te nan-dan Nghe-Tinh toi hom qua" [The meeting of the relief committee for the people of Nghe-Tinh last night], *Bao Dong Phap*, August 18, 1931, p. 1.

people of the same race and country, of the same blood tie with us (*ruot-gia mau-mu*)--together we share in glory and shame, happiness and sadness...in one history of several thousand years...⁴⁹

In 1932 a female writer in *Bao Dong Phap* newspaper urged other women to take up voluntary and charitable work to help typhoon victims in Central Vietnam. She wrote:

Of the same Lac-Hong bloodline [referring to the mythical ancestors of the Viet people], while one is starving the other is full and warm. Seeing this situation how can our hearts be at peace!⁵⁰

The tactic here was to appeal to an imagined shared history and tradition--one dominated by the Kinh people's vision and culture--to move the readers into action. The following couplet was often quoted in these articles calling for donations: "*Nhieu dieu phu lay gia guong, nguoi trong mot nuoc thi thuong nhau cung*", which exhorted people of the same country to love one another. One writer used a common saying to chastise the lack of organized relief in the North for the typhoon victims in Central Vietnam. He wrote that even with horses, "when one horse is wounded all others in the stall also stop eating" so how can they, descendents of dragons and fairies, look away and keep quiet when they see their brothers and sisters in hardship.⁵¹

In rousing a sense of ethnic solidarity and pride, writers sometimes referred to those in need as *dong bao* (compatriot), and *quoc dan* (people of a nation), terms which the writers themselves considered to be new or at least to have new meanings. A writer for *Trung Bac tan van* newspaper, for example,

⁴⁹ T., "Cai tieng khoc cua muoi may van con nguoi" [The cries of tens of thousands of people], *Trung Bac tan van*, (from here on as *TBTV*) July 28, 1924.

⁵⁰ Nguyen Thi Diem Binh, "Doi voi nan dan phia Nam-Trung-Ky" [With regards to the victims of calamities in the southern Central region], *Bao Dong Phap*, May 23 and 24, 1932, p. 1.

⁵¹ Bang Son, "Doi voi tran bao lut phia Nam Trung-Ky" [With regards to the storm and flood in the southern Central region], *Bao Dong Phap*, May 26, 1932, pp. 1-2.

claimed that ever since Western learning became popularized in Vietnam, words such as *quoc dan* and *dong bao* were being used and understood by people.⁵² Greg Lockhart argues that although these terms were in use long before the French conquest, they had attained new potency around 1910, when anti-colonial literati such as Phan Boi Chau had to articulate a new formulation of the nation.⁵³ According to Lockhart, this new formulation of the nation was necessary as the monarch, who once held the key position in uniting the people of Vietnam, was thoroughly discredited as a mere figurehead under French control.⁵⁴ Writings of Phan Boi Chau shifted the focus of nation from the monarch to the people--*quoc dan*--who became the foundation for "the entirely new political category of 'nation'."⁵⁵ It is important to stress, however, that while Phan, a classically trained Monarchist, was calling for a new formulation of the nation based on the people, he was not advocating Western democracy. As Alexander Woodside points out, the ideal Confucian polity, as espoused by Mencius, is a government "for the people" but not "by the people".⁵⁶ According to Woodside, the idea of the people as the foundation of a nation/government was a basic tenet of East Asian Confucian political tradition.⁵⁷ Vietnamese writers in the early twentieth century, however, presented this Confucian idea as a new and modern concept that Vietnam should adopt under their moral guidance.

The writers' Confucian elitism, however, remained evident in their exhortation for philanthropic organizations. At the same time while emphasizing

⁵² H.T.B. "Cac cong cuoc tu-thien o nuoc phap" [Benevolent endeavours in France], *TBTV*, January 17, 1924; see also David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, p. 119.

⁵³ Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms: The Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam*. Sydney, Australia: Allen and Anwin, 1989, pp. 41-45.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁶ Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976, p. 38.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

their shared history and ancestry with the poor, writers for the most part, continued to see poor people as an alien class, separate from them. Some writers, for instance, sometimes referred to the poor, or victims of disasters with not so polite pronouns, such as "*bon*"--a derogatory pronoun for a group or gang of people.⁵⁸ One writer even referred to those in destitution as "*khon nan*", a term which means poor, but usually is used as an insult referring to someone as wretched or vile.⁵⁹ Representations of poor people were usually sympathetic, yet it was clear that many of the writers had had little contact with them. One piece of evidence for this is the stock image that is found in many articles, depicting a mass of starving people moaning and crying for help. One article title captured neatly the typical imagery of the poor and victims of natural disasters: "The cries of tens of thousands of people!"⁶⁰ A description in *Trung Bac tan van* of the subsistence crisis caused by a broken dike was as follows:

The opportunity for benevolent work has arrived. The calamitous breaking of Phi-liet dike took place in our Northern region at the beginning of the rainy season. How many houses have been destroyed! How many fields have been submerged! How many of the fathers leading children, youth carrying old, elder brothers looking after younger ones, husbands looking at their wives, were discouraged because of their plight, in which money they don't have a dollar, paddy they don't have a grain, cooked rice they don't have a mouthful, and clothes they don't have a piece!

⁵⁸ Nguyen Thi Bach Lien, "Buc thu ngo" [Open Letter], *Bao Dong Phap*, May 22, 1932, p. 1.

⁵⁹ H.T.B., "O xu Bac Ky nen lap nhung so te-ban" [Ought to build poorhouses in the Northern region], *TBTV*, Jan 25-26, 1926. On the derogatory connotation of the word "*khon nan*", literary critic Thai Phi noted as he named fiction writer, Nguyen Cong Hoan, *nha van cua nhung hang nguoi khon nan* [the writer of the miserable]: "Here with the word "*khon nan*" one has to understand that at the same time as meaning poor and deserving of sympathy, also means base deserving scorn." As quoted by Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su giam uoc tan bien*, 1862-1945, p. 505.

⁶⁰ Article by T. in *TBTV*, July 28, 1924, p. 1.

That situation is as sorrowful as it can get. The voices of our fellow beings beseeching and wailing have truly sounded the heavens and awakened the earth...⁶¹

A letter from a reader to *Bao Dong Phap* provided a similarly graphic imagined scene:

When I write this letter I imagine seeing in front of me many heart-rending plights. Everyday thousands of people are crying, some crying for their husbands, some calling for their children, their voices lamenting deeply...Over there are many tens of thousands of people, some naked, some without any food, their voices crying...⁶²

Stereotypical depiction of a monolithic poor is not surprising. It continues to occur frequently in modern media coverage of the First World poor or Third World poverty. This lack of contact with "the people", however, make the Vietnamese elite's rhetoric of ethnic solidarity unconvincing. It also strongly suggests that their representation of poverty reflected their own concerns rather than those of the impoverished. Furthermore, in the Vietnamese elite's endeavour to imagine and articulate a *van minh* Vietnamese society and nation, and their claim for moral authority within it, this separation and lack of contact with poor people make their vision seem untenable.

⁶¹ T., "Lam phuc nao cho bang lam phuc nay!" [What benevolent work compares to this!], *TBTV*, July 30, 1924, p. 1.

Views on Permanent Poverty

The focus of philanthropic activities in the 1920s and 1930s were mostly on temporary poverty, instances when natural disasters such as floods and typhoons caused a subsistence crisis. Encouraging people to help those impoverished by a flood was politically safer than advocating relief to those who were destitute all year round. By focusing on subsistence crises, the question about why/how people become poor can be easily and safely answered: natural disasters. In contrast, a charity endeavour such as that of famous novelist/publisher Nhat Linh in the late 1930s to provide housing for the urban poor, would have perhaps raised unwanted questions about the cause of poverty and the government's inadequate welfare provision. There were, however, articles that examined permanent poverty, although writers were cautious about not taking their argument to its natural conclusion and implicating colonial policies in impoverishing the society.

Of the three publications, *Trung Bac tan van* was notable in its focus on permanent poverty, particular the dire condition in the countryside. Even before the economic hardship resulting from the Great Depression of the 1930s attracted media attention, *Trung Bac tan van* writers were discussing the problems of poverty, unemployment, and education for poor students. Although articles on poverty were written by different writers, most of whom signed their names with only their initials, the general tendency among the *Trung Bac tan van* writers was to explain poverty as being caused by particular cultural practices.

⁶² Ho-Thi-Khanh, "Doi voi cai nan bao lut o phia nam Trung-Ky" [With regards to storm and flood disaster in the South of the Central region], *Bao Dong Phap*, may 20, 1932, p. 1.

Vietnamese 'backward' customs and traditions were usually attacked as the cause of poverty. The Vietnamese cultural explanation predated, but bore some resemblance to the "culture of poverty" theory popularized by American anthropologist Oscar Lewis in the late 1950s. The "culture of poverty" theory associated poverty with 'backward' pre-modern cultures, and argued that poor people's improvidence and fatalism make it difficult for them to improve their lives.⁶³ The cultural explanation for poverty in Vietnam fit well with *Trung Bac tan van*'s owner's, Nguyen Van Vinh, view about how the general problems of the country were related to its people's customs and aptitudes, rather than related to the political-economy connected with colonialism and global capitalism.

The culture of poverty explanation could be read in S.B.'s three-part article published in the summer of 1922, entitled, "*Nhung dieu can phai du-phong o cac huong thon*" (Some preventative measures that must be undertaken in the countryside).⁶⁴ S. B. argued that the villages needed to take precautions on issues such as sanitation, creating savings, village patrol, and natural disasters. The writer contended that Vietnamese people, and particularly peasants, lived carelessly (*cau tha*) and simplistically, which caused them to be lazy. S. B. feared that this sort of behaviour hindered social progress and might even cause regression. S. B. stated that while some people argued that poverty, and narrow intellectual development made people simple and sloppy, he suggested the reverse: their sloppy/careless nature made the country poor and backward.

⁶³ Eleanor Leacock, ed., *The Culture of Poverty*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971, p. 11.

⁶⁴ S.B., "Nhung dieu can phai du-phong o cac huong thon", *TBTV*, July 31, 1922, p. 1.

Other causes of poverty often mentioned by writers in *Trung Bac tan van* included: corruption among village officials;⁶⁵ peasants' dependence solely on agricultural activities and not developing sideline artisan activities;⁶⁶ and Vietnamese disdain for manual labour.⁶⁷ Another source of blame for Vietnam's poverty, according to *Trung Bac tan van* writers, was the Vietnamese capitalist (*tu ban*) class. In a number of articles about the misery of the peasants or the lack of opportunity for poor students, the rich people were called upon to lend a hand. One writer attacked the intellectual class for aspiring only to become mandarins, and for being "*vo nghe-nghiep*" (without any trade or skill).⁶⁸ This writer argued that unemployment in Vietnam was caused by the fact that Vietnamese people with financial resources or intellectual capacity were not interested in productive activities such as exploiting new land, developing native industries, or partaking in commerce.

One particular writer, H. T. B., wrote regularly on poverty and the conditions of the peasantry. H. T. B. was probably the penname/initials of Hoang Tang Bi, formerly involved in the Reform Movement, who was a regular and prolific writer for *Trung Bac tan van* until his death in 1939.⁶⁹ In a two-part article, H. T. B. presented the causes of poverty in Vietnam. He noted that although

⁶⁵ B. G., "Mot dip kho chiu cho dan o chon huong thon" [An unbearable occasion for people in the villages], *TBTV*, July 6, 1922, p. 1.

⁶⁶ P., "Mot cai phuong-phap cuu ban cho dan nha-que ta" [A way to relieve poverty for our peasants], *TBTV*, August 5, 1922, p. 1. The same article was re-printed on February 12, 1925, but this time it was signed by "T" rather than "P".

⁶⁷ B. M., "Cai nhan-pham cua bon lao-dong" [The human dignity of the labourers], parts 1&2, *TBTV*, November 15 & 16, 1922, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Nam Kieu, "Cai nan that nghiep cua nguoi minh" [The unemployment problem of our people], *TBTV*, July 9, 1925, p. 1.

living conditions seemed to be improving in Vietnam, only one to two percent of people were actually rich. Outside of these few rich people, there were about seven to eight percent who were doing well, and the rest, according to H. T. B., lived a precarious and miserable life. H. T. B. listed the reasons for such poverty in Vietnam: people spent more than they have; people were improvident; there were not enough trades and professions; there was not enough capital; and villages did not have an alternative source of income.⁷⁰ These causes focused mainly on the customs and habits of the Vietnamese people, while not mentioning the detrimental effects of colonial practices, such as granting huge land concessions to French and Vietnamese plantation owners, burdensome taxes, and state monopolies on salt, alcohol and opium. H. T. B. urged the Vietnamese capitalist class to take a role in helping develop industry and trades, and to create jobs. What H. T. B. neglected to say, or was not permitted to say, was that the colonial government was not interested in helping Indochina develop its native industry. Even the left-wing Popular Front, governing France from 1936 to 1939, which had been vocal in its concerns about the plight of the colonized people, did not support a native industry. The Popular Front's Justin Godard, in his report on Indochina's condition, recommended against the development of industry. Goddard argued that the Vietnamese workers were not ready for such

⁶⁹ Nguyen Q. Thang and Nguyen Ba The, *Tu dien nhan vat lich su Viet Nam* [Dictionary of Historical Figures in Vietnam]. Hanoi: Van Hoa, 1993, p. 255.

⁷⁰ H. T. B., "Cai nguyen-nhan cung-khon o xa hoi ta bay gio" [The causes for poverty in our society today], parts 1 & 2, *TBT*, May 28 and May 30, 1926, p. 1.

an endeavour.⁷¹

In another article, H. T. B. again hammered home the point that the vast majority of Vietnamese people lived in poverty.⁷² Describing the hardship of the poor urban casual workers whose irregular employment kept them in hunger, H. T. B. wrote: "...they toil like buffaloes and horses; they are resigned to their fate of being as ignorant as wood and rocks".⁷³ In this article H. T. B. provided no explanations for the pyramid-like profile of the rich and poor. The only cause he noted here was that in the last five to seven years (i.e. 1919-1922) natural disasters had impoverished people, forcing them to beg and some to become criminals. Remarkable in this presentation, was the image that people were poor despite their hard work. Absent in H. T. B.'s article was the differentiation, found in some pre-modern and modern European discourse, between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor.⁷⁴ In other words, there was little indication that the writer believed poverty was a moral problem.⁷⁵ Furthermore, although H. T. B. was making a claim that poverty was a problem in Vietnam, the problem was not with the poor *per se*, but with the cultural practices of the society at large, and with the educated and wealthy class. In this and other articles mentioned,

⁷¹ Panivong Norindr, "The Popular Front's Colonial Policies in Indochina: Reassessing the Popular Front's 'Colonial Altruism'", in Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, eds., *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front*. London: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1999, pp. 230-248.

⁷² H. T. B., "Cai so nguoi ngheo-kho o nuoc minh" [The lot of the poor in our country], *TBT*, December 18, 1926, p. 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France 1750-1789*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 22.

⁷⁵ Elsewhere in one article H. T. B. did make a distinction among urban beggars. He noted that there were the disabled and old people who had to beg, and then there were the physically able ones who were just lazy. It is worth noting that in this particular article H. T. B. was reiterating and supporting an argument recently published in a French paper. H. T. B., "O xu Bac-ky nen lap

criticisms were aimed at social customs and practices--such as the sole reliance on agriculture, imprudent spending habits, and the general prejudice against trade, commerce, and physical labour. The burden of responsibility to help alleviate poverty was placed on society as a whole, with the emphasis on the role of the intellectuals to educate and the rich to invest wisely and unselfishly. H. T. B. ended the article with a plea to the capitalist and intellectual class:

Alas! Viet Nam still has an abundance of land and resources, its population not yet dense, and its people's characteristics are not lazy. Why then should it be that we continue to endure miserable living conditions like this? Intellectuals and capitalists, what do you think?

In other articles H. T. B. presented different ways in which "*dai tu-ban*" (the big capitalists) could assist in poverty relief. In articles on the plights of poor students, H. T. B. called on the rich to finance poor students so they could study both within the country and abroad.⁷⁶ The "big capitalists" could, according to H. T. B., also contribute to helping develop uncultivated lands. H. T. B., along with other writers, such as T., advocated cultivating new lands as one way to alleviate poverty.⁷⁷ According to these writers, while poor peasants did not have the necessary capital to spearhead these endeavours, the rich, with state assistance, could provide the financial investment and organization that were needed.

nhung so te-ban"[Need to set up poor houses in the Northern Region], *TBT*, January 25 & 26, 1926, p.1.

⁷⁶ H. T. B., "Cai guong kien-nhan cho hoc-tro ngheo" [The exemplary patience of poor students], *TBT*, two parts, December 20-21, and December 23, 1926, p. 1 for both issues; H. T. B., "Mot cach giup do cho hoc-tro ngheo" [One way to help poor students], *TBT*, March 23, 1927, p. 1.

⁷⁷ H. T. B., "Cuu hoang khong gi bang khan hoang" [Nothing is equivalent to developing untitled land in the helping the abandoned], *TBT*, July 19, 1925, p. 1; T., "Cai nong-noi cung-dan that-

In the 1930s, when the economy was suffering the effects of the Great Depression, more attention was given to unemployment and permanent poverty. Starting from 1929, *Bao Dong Phap* began publishing relatively more thoughtful pieces about poverty than in its earlier years. There were articles about the high costs of living and how this affected family life and hygiene.⁷⁸ Beginning in 1931 more attention was being placed on the worsening of the economic situation and the resulting unemployment and poverty. One writer, Hong Linh, drew readers' attention to the problem of unemployment, arguing that desperate people without work were forced to become vagabonds and criminals.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, impoverished peasants continued to be attracted to the cities, where they thought life would be better. The writer urged the people and the state to get involved in solving the problem, suggesting that the government should open more orphanages to help poor children learn trades.

Similar sentiments were expressed in an article concerning unemployed women.⁸⁰ The writer noted that unemployment among women was slowly becoming a problem. Since there were so few job opportunities for women, many poor women were forced to turn to prostitution. The writer advocated that mutual-help organizations or unions be set up to help women. This call was supported by a writer whose article was published a week later. Hoang Thuc

nghiep o Bac-Ky ta"[The plight of the poor unemployed in our Northern region], *TBTV*, three parts, April 22, 24, and 27, 1927, p. 1 for all three issues.

⁷⁸ Ha-Hai, "Nha cua dat do voi gia-dinh nguoi Nam ta" [Costly housing and Vietnamese families], *Bao Dong Phap*, Oct. 2, 1929, p. 1; Ng-V-Thuan, "Doi dat do rat co hai cho su ve-sinh" [High living costs have negative impacts on hygiene], *Bao Dong Phap*, October 9, 1929, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Hong Linh, "Mot hang nguoi dang thuong--cai nan that-nghiep o xu ta" [A category of people deserving compassion--the unemployment problem in our country], *Bao Dong Phap*, Feb. 27, 1931, pp. 1-2.

Oanh opined that instead of fighting for equal rights with men, women should focus on helping other women improve their situation.⁸¹ Hoang contrasted what she imagined her readers' life to have been with what she imagined life would have been like for the many poor women:

Everyday we sisters are able to see our children eating and dressing well. When they are a little tired, we call on the doctor for medicine. With healthy bodies, bright faces, they go off with their books to school twice a day. In this situation we sisters do not think about the many families of different circumstances: hungry children without food, the sick without any medicine. Their bodies bent and weak, their faces pale, these children are destined to die young.⁸²

Hoang ended the article with the proclamation: "Dear sisters, the people are the foundation of a nation!" This declaration of the supposedly new understanding of nationhood--that it was based on the people--made her call for charity work more urgent. According to Hoang, helping the poor was more than an act of kindness. Hoang was in effect making poor relief an issue of national importance, connecting it with national well-being and survival. Her understanding of the people, however, was shaky. Like other writers examined thus far, Hoang had no direct experience with the poor. She imagined them perpetually hungry and miserable, needing the help and guidance of the wealthy.

In attempting to increase readers' empathy for the plight of the poor, *Bao Dong Phap* published articles highlighting individuals' experiences. This

⁸⁰ B. D. P. [*Bao Dong Phap*?], "Van-de phu-nu that nghiep" [The problem of unemployed women], *Bao Dong Phap*, Sept. 9, 1931, p. 1.

⁸¹ Hoang Thuc Oanh, "Lap hoi phu nu tuong-te" [Organizing mutual-help association for women], *Bao Dong Phap*, Sept. 16, 1931, p. 1.

documentary style of reportage writing, in which writers through interviews or through investigative work portray the experiences of poor people and their world, was immensely popular in the early 1930s. Famous for this type of work were journalists such as Tam Lang (whose work will be discussed in Chapter Six), Trong Lang, and Hoang Dao. *Bao Dong Phap* did not attract famous writers like Tam Lang, but nevertheless, its articles are worth noting. In an article on manual weaving, for instance, the reporter interviewed a young woman about the difficulties her family faced in trying to compete against mechanized weaving.⁸³ The bulk of the article was presented in the words of this young woman, who revealed that her family had been in the weaving business for three to four generations. According to her, they were working harder than before, but still could not make ends meet. Her brothers had to leave home for work elsewhere, while her younger brothers had to look after neighbours' buffaloes for extra income.

In a three-part investigative report on Hanoi during the Great Depression, writer Phuong Du⁸⁴ admitted that he was emulating European journalists who had written investigative articles about various European cities during the economic crisis.⁸⁵ In the second installment, Phuong Du showed the impact of the Great Depression on the local and individual level. According to the writer, in 1931-1932 many businesses went bankrupt. There had been instances when in

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ H. K. Q., "Nghe giet bang chan tay" [The trade of weaving by hands and feet], *Bao Dong Phap*, January 10, 1932, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Like many writers' names in *Bao Dong Phap*, "Phuong Du" is likely a pseudonym, roughly translates as "Traveler of Places".

one month two to three stores on Hang Dao Street, in the Old Quarters of Hanoi, had to close down. In other cases, stores that used to bring in one hundred piastres daily could no longer make even five piastres. For a more devastating and vivid example, Phuong Du described how an economic downturn effected a "*cu-li*"⁸⁶ (coolie) family. According to Phuong Du, before the 1930s, the family was able to manage on the meagre wages (thirty-five cents per day, or .35 piastre) brought in by the husband and wife. They work as casual labourers, unloading and transporting goods off ships and boats. In the last two months, neither of them had been able to get much work, making life severely difficult.

Like the writers for *Trung Bac tan van*, *Bao Dong Phap* writers tended to be sympathetic toward the unemployed and poor people. The assumption of these writers was that people were poor despite their hard work. An inference one could make was that if employment were created, those in poverty would be able to improve their lives. Consequently, there was no need for confinement and moral instruction, which had been the focus of many Western European poor-relief policies and institutions.

According to writers for *Bao Dong Phap* and for *Trung Bac tan van*, it was not the poor whose behavior needed modification as much as the rich. Therefore, these writers were focusing their advocacy toward the elite--those with money and education--to remind them of their responsibility toward their unfortunate compatriots. The elite class was encouraged to be frugal and

⁸⁵ Phuong Du, "Hanoi 1932", *Bao Dong Phap*, May 2-3, pp. 1-2, May 4 pp. 1-2, and May 7, 1932, p. 1.

socially responsible.⁸⁷ Although the prescribed duty of the elite was one that was entrenched in Confucian teachings, it was presented in these articles as a modern way of behaving within a *van minh* society. In one article under the heading of "Opinions of the Readers", the "nouveaux riches" were criticized for squandering their money on gambling, alcohol, and drugs.⁸⁸ Others were criticized for being too tight-fisted, refusing to give any money to charity. Another article in the "Opinions of the Readers" section, blamed high unemployment among the educated class on Vietnamese society's contemptuous attitude toward trade and commerce.⁸⁹ In another instance, an article written by a Mlle. Mo-Trung, berated upper-class women for their selfishness.⁹⁰ According to Mo-Trung, in contrast to rural women and urban middle-class women who spent all their time working and worrying about family finances, wealthy women had no worries and thus were in the best position to help society. Mo-Trung lamented that these wealthy women, however, had a low level of education and were preoccupied only with face powder, mirrors and combs.

Not all rich people were equally selfish and uncaring. In 1932 *Bao Dong Phap* published a small notice praising the work of Louis Chuc, an entrepreneur

⁸⁶ Similar to the English word, "coolie", this term has negative connotations. Nevertheless, it was used widely in newspapers, journals, and fiction to refer to people who perform hard manual work.

⁸⁷ Calls for frugality were voiced in the following articles: Tung Phong, "Tinh hình kinh-te nam 1931" [The economic situation in 1931], *Bao Dong Phap*, January 3, 1932, p. 1; Luong Nhat Tuan, "Quoc dan ta voi quan-niem kinh-te" [Our people and views of the economy], *Bao Dong Phap*, January 30, 1932, p. 2.

⁸⁸ T. "Mot hang giao o nuoc ta" [A category of wealthy people in our country], *Bao Dong Phap*, May 30 & 31, 1931, p. 1.

⁸⁹ Ng. V. Thuoc, "Nguyen nhan cai nan tri-thuc that-nghiep" [The cause for the unemployment problem among intellectuals], *Bao Dong Phap*, May 28, 1932, p. 1.

⁹⁰ Mlle. Mo-Trung, "Tinh hình sinh hoạt của chị em nước ta ngày nay" [The living situation of our sisters today], *Bao Dong Phap*, January 6, 1932, p. 1.

who was setting up a night shelter for homeless people.⁹¹ Donors during fund-raising campaigns were similarly praised and presented as models for all to emulate. The thrust of propaganda on charity and the writings on poverty in general, was to teach or remind the rich and the middle class of their responsibility toward the poor. Undertaking such responsibility, one was reminded, was not only a moral but a social duty. Thus while writers were using tools of the French colonizers--the state-subsidized newspapers, and rhetoric about modernity and progress--their vision of a *van minh* society was not a Westernized one, but one that was a *métissage* of Confucian and modern values. In their perspective, a *van minh* Vietnamese nation would be modern, but would draw strength from the mythical Kinh ethnic unity, and would be maintained by a social harmony in which hierarchy and social responsibility functioned simultaneously.

'Modern' Poor Relief Institutions

Promoters of philanthropy were abundantly clear about the types of charitable work that they deemed important. Charitable activities such as giving alms to beggars, helping build temples, and taking care of burials of the poor, were devalued. A writer in *Bao Dong Phap*, for example, criticized Hanoi's two large charitable organizations, Hop-thien and Phuc-thien societies, whose mandates were to provide proper funerals for destitute people at their death.⁹² He blasted

⁹¹ Anonymous, "Ve viec lap tru-so cho nguoi ngheo ngu dem" [The work of creating a residence for the poor people to sleep], *Bao Dong Phap*, 1588, January 19, 1932, p. 1.

⁹² Bach-Nhon-Tinh, "Cuu nguoi chet doi chang phai la mot viec tu-thien?" [Is helping starving people not a benevolent task?], *Bao Dong Phap*, August 29, 1931, p. 1.

these societies for wasting money on fake gold and offerings for the funeral rites, when that money could be used to feed the poor. As far as he was concerned, Hop-thien and Phuc-thien were not worthy to be called benevolent societies. Another writer argued that erecting temples and bells was not as important as helping feed and clothe victims of natural disasters.⁹³

Writers praised instead, charity that involved such endeavours as building poorhouses, establishing kindergartens and orphanages, and organizing Western-style mutual-aid societies in addition to providing emergency relief. In an article about the problem of an increase in the number of beggars, Dang Dinh Tan called upon "high-class" men (*cac ong thuong-luu*) to build workhouses to teach trades to beggars.⁹⁴ A similar call for an institution for the poor was made by H. T. B., who hoped that the government would build a poorhouse (*so te ban*) in the North.⁹⁵ H. T. B. noted that a recent article in a French paper by Yves Le Gadec on this topic prompted him to write in support of Le Gadec's idea. H. T. B. reported that the practice of sending beggars and the poor back to their home villages was not working. What they needed, instead, was a place to take care of the very old and young beggars, while at the same time, to punish the lazy ones and teach them viable trades. Although there were already private hospitals for the poor run by the church, H. T. B. wanted a more comprehensive institution, managed by the state. H. T. B. emphasized that this approach to poor relief had

⁹³ T., "Lam phuc nao cho bang lam phuc nay!" [What benevolent work compares to this!], *TBTV*, July 30, 1924, p. 1.

⁹⁴ Dang Dinh Tan, "Mot hang nguoi nen giup do" [A category of people that one should help], *TBTV*, July 2, 1924, p. 1.

⁹⁵ H. T. B., "O xu Bac-ky nen lap nhung so te-ban" [Need to set up poor houses in the Northern region], *TBTV*, January 25 & 26, 1926, p. 1.

brought good results in the "advanced civilized countries".

These writers were advocating a more formalized and institutionalized form of charity, similar to those that arose in Western Europe in the early Modern period.⁹⁶ One *Nam Phong* writer lamented the fact that Vietnam lacked large-scale benevolent organizations and institutions.⁹⁷ The writer's emphasis was on not so much the types of institutions or their function, but their size, and their corporate nature. While Vietnamese writers were influenced by Western European models, they did not seem as concerned with the moral transformation of those committed to the institutions as they were with the value for the elite of organizing such an endeavour. Indeed, with the exception of emergency relief, the European poor relief institutions as cited by the above writers, were meant by their European creators and proponents as a means to reform the poor. During the Enlightenment period educating paupers, teaching them work skills as well as inculcating them with industrious habits were seen as critical in poor relief.⁹⁸ Institutions, such as the workhouses, were thought by their supporters to be more efficient and judicious because not only did they provide relief discriminatingly, they also tried to instruct and raise the moral level of the recipients.⁹⁹ Labeled as the "Great Confinement", the development of large institutions in Europe was considered a project of discipline and control, in which

⁹⁶ Robert Jutte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 101-104.

⁹⁷ Nguyen Huu-Tien, "Lap au-tri-vien ich loi nhu the nao?" [What are the benefits of creating kindergartens?], *Nam Phong*, 63, September 1922, pp. 274-279.

⁹⁸ Jutte, *Poverty, Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 103-104.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 169-175.

labour was "instituted as an exercise in moral reform and constraint."¹⁰⁰ Since many Vietnamese writers examined here were of the opinion that the poor of Vietnam worked hard from dawn to dusk, the moral reform of modern poor relief institutions was not important. What was crucial was the establishment of these modern trappings and that they, the Vietnamese elite, be the instigators. Thus while the elite were encouraging Vietnamese to emulate the West's charitable institutions and organizations, their goal was decidedly not the same as their European counterpart. Instead, the focus was on the cultivation of a modern national perspective and social responsibility among the elite.

The endeavour to build kindergartens (*au tri vien*) in Vietnamese villages was a remarkable demonstration of the hybridized values underscoring the Vietnamese elite's discourse on poor relief. The idea of establishing kindergartens was initiated by Louis Marty. With his urging, the Hoi Khai-Tri Tien-Duc (AFIMA) enthusiastically took on the project in the summer of 1922. This association was led by high-ranking mandarins, such as the Governor of Ha Dong province, Hoang Trong Phu, and King Khai Dinh's uncle, Than Trong Hue,¹⁰¹ and included members such as Pham Quynh and Nguyen Van Vinh. AFIMA was formed in 1919 with a mandate to disseminate Western and French ideas in order to preserve the moral foundation of the Vietnamese people.¹⁰² AFIMA fit into Governor General Sarraut's plan to win over native support to bolster French prestige and give credibility to France's 'civilizing mission' rhetoric.

¹⁰⁰ Michel Foucault, "The Great Confinement", in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, p. 138.

¹⁰¹ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 50.

This approach of 'association' was championed by republicans, such as Sarraut, over the former less subtle and less successful 'assimilation' approach. The kindergarten project, therefore, was thoroughly a French initiated and supported endeavour that provided the appropriate rhetoric to bolster French prestige in the area of social welfare. The Vietnamese elite who carried out the project collaborated with the French, and yet in their promotion of kindergartens, they maintained a distinct Confucian concern about the cultivation of the elite class. AFIMA propaganda about the values of building kindergartens emphasized not only the dissemination of 'modern' ideas about child-rearing to the rural masses, but also inculcation of the middle and upper classes about their roles in poor relief.

In the summer of 1922, *Nam Phong* and other newspapers, including *Trung Bac tan van* and *Bao Dong Phap*, began to publish articles explaining the purposes and workings of a kindergarten, an institution foreign to Vietnam at that time. Kindergartens were portrayed as the solution to many of Vietnam's social problems, from ignorance of hygienic practices, to poverty, to a lack of a sense of civic responsibility. According to Nguyen Don-Phuc, a publicist for the creation of kindergartens, the state of childcare in Vietnam was deplorable, particularly in the poor households.¹⁰³ His description of poor children was as follows. In poor families parents were away working from morning until night and had to leave their children with aged grandparents or on their own. The children were dirty

¹⁰² Hoi Khai-Tri Tien-Duc, "Kinh cao cac nhai hoi vien hoi 'Khai-Tri Tien-Duc'" [The Report of the honourable members of the 'Khai-Tri Tien-Duc'], 62, *Nam Phong*, August 1922, pp. 77-80.

¹⁰³ Nguyen Don-Phuc, "Van-de au-tri vien" [The issue of kindergartens], *Nam Phong*, 60, June 1922, pp. 427-437.

and unkempt, playing dangerous games. Not only was their health neglected, their moral education was also compromised. Nguyen Don-Phuc lamented:

Alas! Could those children be the descendents of dragons and fairies [mythical originators of the Viet people]? Could they have been born in the civilized twentieth-century society?"¹⁰⁴

The promoters for kindergartens argued that the existence of this institution contributed to the strength of the advanced 'civilized' countries.¹⁰⁵ Children from a young age, they argued, could be taught 'modern' ways of behaving, which were hygienic, healthy, and moral. They could be instilled with a love for each other and for the country, as well as be taught about their responsibility to society. According to Nguyen Ton-Phuc, those people working to establish a kindergarten and those who would staff the institution, would not only be performing a benevolent act, but also contributing to educating the nation's people, which was the basis for a civilized nation.¹⁰⁶ The emphasis was clearly on the argument that other 'civilized' countries such as France, England, Germany, Belgium, the United States, and even Japan, already had kindergartens.¹⁰⁷ One *Nam Phong* writer pointed out that by 1906 Japan already had 360 kindergartens with 979 kindergarten teachers, and an enrollment of 32,791 children.¹⁰⁸ In short, kindergartens were presented as a 'modern' institution of a *van minh* society.

The campaign to raise funds for building kindergartens was underway in the summer of 1922. On July 26, 1922 a kindergarten in Phuong Trung village,

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 430.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 428.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 432.

¹⁰⁷ V. D., "Cai-luong nhan-chung" [Reforming the human race], *TBTV*, August 29, 1922, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ Nguyen Huu-Tien, "Lap Au-tri-vien ich loi nhu the nao?" [What are the benefits of establishing kindergartens?], *Nam Phong*, 64, October 1922, p. 278.

Ha Dong province was opened.¹⁰⁹ The Resident Superior of Tonkin, Monguillot, as well as Louis Marty, the head of the *Sûreté*, Governor Hoang Trong Phu and many other high-ranking officials attended the opening. It does not appear, however, that AFIMA had much to do with this particular kindergarten, since the association met only a few days before (on July 22) to discuss ways to establish kindergartens. A *Trung Bac tan van* writer, who visited Phuong Trung village's new kindergarten, praised the facility, which took in sixty impoverished children, seven years and under.¹¹⁰ The author noted that there were already marked improvements among the children, even after just ten days of attending the institution. According to the author, the achievements were made by following a simple regiment: washing the children with soap, washing their clothes in hot water, and providing them with two meals a day. Another kindergarten was opened on September 24, 1922 in Xich Dang village, Hung Yen province.¹¹¹ In the opening speech of the village official, AFIMA was thanked for its support in establishing the kindergarten.¹¹² In this speech it was explained that the kindergarten could accommodate forty children, seven years and under. The children, however, must be from poor families in which both parents worked. By 1925 three provinces (Ha-Dong, Hung-Yen, and Bac-Ninh) had kindergartens, although how many in each province is unclear.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹"Van de Au-tri-vien" [The issue of kindergartens], *Nam Phong*, 61, July 1922, p. 69.

¹¹⁰ V. D., "Cai-luong nhan-chung" [Reforming the human race], part 2, *TBTV*, August 31, 1922, p. 1.

¹¹¹ "Au-tri-vien lang Xich-Dang" [Kindergarten of Xich-Dang village], *Nam Phong*, 63, September 1922, pp. 231-233.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ "Hoi khai-tri tien-duc", *Bao Dong Phap*, May 5, 1925, p. 1.

The Discourse on National Survival

The promotion for kindergartens, along with the other campaigns for poor relief, became a forum for reflection on a number of important social and political issues related to the creation of a *van minh* society, such as citizens' duties, national survival, and women's role in society. Just as Hue-Tam Ho Tai finds that "disputes on culture and morality usually had a political subtext,"¹¹⁴ the discourse on charity provides insight into the frustrations and anxieties of those elite who might have been willing to collaborate with the colonialists, but were nevertheless still concerned about national survival. What the discourse on charity also reveals is the struggle over cultural values--the elite's attempt to strike a balance between old and new, and between Western and Vietnamese cultural practices.

Campaigners for poor relief argued that performing one's part in charity was a duty that citizens must fulfill. The prolific *Trung Bac tan van* writer, H. T. B., whose work I have already examined above, argued this point, implying that caring for the poor was a modern (*duy tan*) way to behave. He wrote:

In these past few decades since our people have been excited by the movement of Westernization (*phong-trao Au-My*), many people have been awakened from their dream. They now know what it is to be a nation, and what it is to be a race. They now know what it is to be a country and the duty of a people toward the country. They know how to treat each other with some measure of sentiments, rather than being indifferent and treating each other like unrelated strangers as they had done three or four decades ago.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 89.

¹¹⁵ H. T. B., "Cai long tuong ai tuong tro nguoi trong nuoc voi nhau" [The feelings of mutual love and mutual help among people of a country], *TBTV*, August 5, 1925, p.1.

H. T. B. continued to argue that the foundation of a modern society was this national awareness and the acceptance of one's responsibility toward the nation and compatriots.

In another article H. T. B. placed charity as the central issue in to the survival of Vietnam. Influenced by the ideas associated with Social Darwinism, which depicted nations in life and death competitions, H. T. B. connected the strength of the country to the people's enthusiasm for charitable work, collective responsibility, and social cohesion. In comparing the philanthropic activities of Vietnam to those of France, he argued that French society, with its many benevolent societies and institutions, was geared toward people helping each other.¹¹⁶ Perhaps meant as a veiled attack on the colonial situation, the writer explained that French people were not born more philanthropic than Vietnamese people, but the difference in philanthropic activities was the result of having political organizations and social habits that fostered this type of caring for the collective good. The author continued to explain that France was a republic in which everyone could participate in politics. As a result, ordinary people could feel that the nation was theirs and feel a sense of duty toward their country and compatriots. The author failed to mention that French women at that time still did not have the vote. H. T. B. then contrasted the situation in France to Vietnam's history, in which monarchs controlled land and resources as their personal property. Thus Vietnamese people developed a habit of being self-sufficient and relying only on themselves, and did not think about the collective. According to H.T.B., when the new Western ideas began to be disseminated, thinking began to change, so that the words "*quoc dan*" (people, nation) and "*dong bao*" (compatriots) were beginning to be uttered and understood. People were

¹¹⁶ H. T. B., "Cac cong-cuoc tu-thien o nuoc Phap" [Benevolent work in France], *TBTV*, January 17, 1924, p. 1.

beginning to participate in public charity, but their activities lacked endurance and fell apart quickly. H. T. B. exclaimed:

Alas! A poor and weak country like ours in the middle of the twentieth century, have only our public spirit (*cong tam*), and our ability to love and help one another. We only have these to rely on in trying to lessen the symptoms of systemic illness (*tat thong*), to increase our fortune, peace, and happiness. Then perhaps our race will become increasingly stronger, and more widely educated, and only then can we hope to survive in this period of world competition.¹¹⁷

H. T. B.'s lamentation of the lack of charity and social organization in Vietnam reflected the overall mood and judgement of early twentieth-century Vietnamese intellectuals. As Woodside suggests, one of the dominating concerns of Vietnamese intellectuals across the political spectrum, and of various philosophical dispositions, was social integration.¹¹⁸ According to Woodside, despite the long history of collective action against foreign invaders, Vietnamese intellectuals still criticized their society for lacking a "national perspective" or a national spirit. What is remarkable about H. T. B.'s argument is that there was no acknowledgement of the importance of individualism in liberal democratic societies of the West. H. T. B. instead chose to highlight collective organizations as the hallmark of Western nations, the secret to Western power and strength.

In three more articles published over the summers of 1924 and 1925, H. T. B. continued his attack on the lack of civic responsibility among Vietnamese people. The thrust of this writer's argument was that in order to be a strong nation, to escape Darwinian "laws of selection" (*cong-le dao thai*), people must learn to take care of one another, and to foster a sense of collective

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*.

responsibility, love for country, and respect for the common good.¹¹⁹ The writer stated that because of the long history of absolutism, Vietnamese people knew only how to submit to authorities. Unable to participate in governing, the people had no connection to the nation. Without feeling connected, people did not see themselves as a collective and did not help each other.¹²⁰ The importance of political rights, according to the logic of H. T. B.'s argument, was that it fostered collective adhesion, rather than individual's self-actualization.

The issue of political participation was taken up by female writers, who urged other women to get involved in benevolent activities. Several writers argued that since they were unable to have full participation in politics, Vietnamese women ought to channel their energy toward charity. One writer stated:

Vietnamese girls (*gai nha Nam*) are not yet able to follow the example of Western girls in stepping out and mobilizing in the political direction. Therefore, all the labour should be offered toward benevolent work...¹²¹

The writer explained that philanthropy was valuable as a responsibility toward the fatherland (*to quoc*), and not any less worthy than the political pursuits of men. The only difference was that charity work was anonymous while politics brought fame.¹²² The irony of this article is remarkable, since Vietnamese men could not participate legally or effectively in politics. The implication from this article is that both Vietnamese men and women should direct their energy to charity, a realm in

¹¹⁹ H. T. B., "Long cong duc cua nguoi minh con kem that!" [Our people's morality is truly inferior!], *TBTV*, Aug 12, 1924; "Cai long tuong ai tuong tro nguoi trong nuoc voi nhau" [Mutual love and mutual help among people of a country], *TBTV*, August 5, 1925 and part two on August 7, 1925.

¹²⁰ H. T. B., "Cai long tuong ai tuong tro nguoi trong nuoc voi nhau".

¹²¹ Thai Hoa, "Chi em ta nen lo tien-bo ve duong tu-thien" [We sisters ought to concern ourselves with becoming more benevolent], *Bao Dong Phap*, May 27, 1932, p. 1.

¹²² *Ibid.*

which they could assert their authority, and affect change.

Another writer, Mlle. B.T., wrote that with the recent social changes, Vietnamese women gained some rights in society, not like before when their names had been "erased and forgotten". But because of their particular make-up and the "Annamese" social system, Vietnamese women were not able to participate in politics, not able to "jostle with the men to demand equality and equal rights...like our sisters in the modern Western countries (*nuoc tan tien Au-My*)."¹²³ B. T. praised the women of Saigon for their ability to organize a benefit fair, and she contrasted them with women in the North whom she saw as lagging behind:

People often say that 'light' is passed from the North to the South, but with regard to women's evolution of thoughts, perhaps it is faster in the South and Centre than the North.¹²⁴

Mlle. B.T. suggested that people in the South had more exposure to the West, and in the North traditionalism made it difficult for women to progress. She mentioned that the many times when women in the North organized benefit fairs (perhaps she was referring to the women's fair of 1922 that was discussed earlier), they were criticized for their initiatives. She lamented, "it's truly sad and tiresome for us sisters in the North, for we don't know how to foster community sentiments, and to extend lines of communication."¹²⁵ Mlle. B. T. as well as other female writers¹²⁶ judged that Northern Vietnamese women lacked political and

¹²³ Mlle B.T., "Cuoc cho-phien phu nu Saigon" [The Women's Fair in Saigon], *Bao Dong Phap*, April 24, 1932, p. 1.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ See also, Nguyen Thi Diem, "Cam tuong ve viec to chuc cho-phien cua chi em Nam-ky" [Impressions of the task of our Southern sisters in organizing a fair], *Bao Dong Phap*, April 25-26, 1932, p. 1.

social liberation in comparison to Western women and even to women in Saigon. Within the discourse on charity, they saw an opportunity to advance the issue of female emancipation without challenging the Confucian social system. The emphasis therefore was placed on urging women to participate in charity to help their country and compatriots. In other words, involvement in charity would allow women to participate in the public realm, to fulfill their 'citizenship' duty, and to contribute to a national cause without seeming to transgress the Confucian acceptability. The Northern female writers were working out a balance between Westernized ideas of women's liberation with their own cultural values, all within the discourse of poor relief.

The male and female contributors to *Trung Bac tan van* and *Bao Dong Phap* argued that the secret to the West's success was its citizens' willingness to participate in charitable organizations. They advanced that it was 'modern' and *van minh* to go beyond selfish individualism and think collectively. Thus while these writers were openly criticizing Confucian values for keeping Vietnam from progressing, they were reinforcing values of collective and social responsibility that were not foreign to Vietnamese culture.

Conclusion

In examining the discourse on charity and poor relief in early twentieth century Vietnam, it is clear that the conservative Northern elite was presenting charity as a new and important dimension of a *van minh* society. The boom in *quoc ngu* publishing was widening the scope of philanthropy, extending people's charitable activities throughout the country, and thus making poor relief a national concern. Rhetoric of ethnic cohesion based on myths about the origin of the Viet people

was used to mobilize donation and participation. At the same time, the discourse on charity also provided an opportunity safe from colonial censorship for the articulation of national issues, such as citizenship, social responsibility, women's role, and national survival.

There was a general urgency in the elite's campaigns. It was not merely the desperation of victims of flood or the oppression of landless poor that made writers on poor relief anxious. Participation in philanthropy and large charitable institutions were seen as trappings of a modern industrialized society, and writers were desperate for Vietnam to be modern for the sake of national survival. From their perspective, the process of organizing modern forms of charity, and being able to reduce some of the eyesore symptoms of poverty, would help elevate Vietnam to the level of other *van minh* societies. Thus the collaborating elite's preoccupation with Vietnam's lack of formalized philanthropic and social organizations reflected their anxieties about the future of Vietnam as a nation, and their own ambition as the legitimate authority within it.

The writers examined in this chapter were on the whole educated urbanites familiar to varying degrees with Western thoughts and trends. The medium in which they wrote was a Western import, endorsed if not subsidized by the colonial state. In their writing they emphasized the importance of charity by linking it to Western and modern societies. At the same time, however, they were not endorsing Western values, but a hybridized version, which placed importance on hierarchy, social harmony, social responsibility, and collective interest. They were in fact reinforcing the very foundation of Confucian values, while claiming them to be Western and new.

Chapter 6: Poverty, Gender, and Nation in Vietnamese Literature (1930s-1940s)

Modern Vietnamese journalism and prose fiction owe a debt to French colonialism. The conditions and opportunities created in the early twentieth century by colonial rule allowed for the emergence of new types of literature--modern novels and short stories--which in turn posed a serious challenge to colonialism itself. This chapter will examine two prominent groups of Northern Vietnamese writers of the 1930s and 1940s, whose novels and short stories focused on the poor. The first group is the *Tu luc van doan* (the Self-Reliance Literary group), an organization of Westernized liberal intellectuals. The second group is composed of left-leaning social realist writers. Although the fiction writings examined here provided contemporary readers with descriptive and seemingly apolitical portrayals of poverty, they were not simply critiques of society in general. The works of the first generation of Vietnamese modern prose writers were strong indictments against French colonialism. The treatment of female characters and use of gendered imagery made these short stories and novels expressions of anti-colonial sentiments. In these works the symbolic feminine nation and masculine Confucian moral order were used to express the authors' anguish over the moral degeneration of their society and the loss of their nation. By openly exhibiting scenes of absolute poverty and social deterioration after nearly half a century of colonization, these writers made a mockery of the French claim to a 'civilizing' mission.

Another underlying theme in this chapter is the problem of representation of the poor by privileged male writers. For the most part, the intellectuals of Northern Vietnam were men of middle to upper-middle class families, who had access to education and lived in an urbanized and Westernized environment. Many of the writers examined here lived a relatively comfortable life in comparison to the misery they described in their stories. Of these privileged men, perhaps Nguyen Hong could have claimed to have been temporarily poor. Nguyen Hong's autobiographical details indicate that he and his family suffered some years of financial hardship. It is clear, however, that these writers were painfully aware of the separation between them and their subjects. One senses that it was precisely the desire to close the gap between the small group of urban intellectuals and the mass of rural poor that resulted in the copious amount of literature written about the lives of the poor. Notwithstanding their good intentions and genuine concerns for those living in poverty, the first generation of Northern Vietnamese prose writers were raised on Confucian elitism and schooled in Western science and arts. This bi-cultural heritage shaped the writers' understanding and portrayal of poverty. In this context the literature written about the lives of the poor is valuable for its symbolic as opposed to its realistic depiction of colonial poverty.

Prose Fiction in Twentieth-Century Vietnam

Colonialism was the backdrop to this development in prose fiction and journalism. In addition to exposing the Vietnamese educated class to Western literature, French colonial policies on language and censorship played an important role in the development of modern prose fiction (novels and short stories).¹ The emergence of prose fiction in the early twentieth century, like the development of journalistic writing examined in Chapter Five, was greatly encouraged by the development and proliferation of *quoc ngu* (the national script).² The boom in *quoc ngu* newspapers also contributed to the emergence of modern fiction, as newspapers were vehicles that introduced Western literature in translation to a wide Vietnamese audience. *Dong Duong tap chi* (Indochina review), for example, carried translated installments of French classics, such as Alexander Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, and La Fontaine's *Fables*.³ Later, when Vietnamese writers began producing their own modern fiction, newspapers and periodicals provided a forum for their work. Social realist writer Nguyen Cong Hoan, for example, had

¹ According to John Schafer and The Uyen, the first Vietnamese novels appeared in 1910. In that year Tran Chanh Chieu published *Hoang To Anh ham oan* [The unjust suffering of Hoang To Anh], and Truong Duy Toan, published *Phan Yen ngoai su* [an Unofficial History of Phan Yen]. Ho Bieu Chanh followed with *Ai lam duoc?* [Who can do it?] in 1912. Schafer and The Uyen, "The Novel Emerges in Cochinchina", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 52, 4 (November 1993), pp. 854-884.

² Cao-Thi Nhu-Quynh and John Schafer, "Ho Bieu Chanh and the Early Development of the Vietnamese Novel", *Vietnam Forum*, 12 (1988), p. 100.

³ Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California, p. 79. These novels were translated by Nguyen Van Vinh.

his first short story published in *An Nam tap chi* (The journal of Annam), and later became a regular contributor to *Tieu thuyet thu bay* (Saturday novels).⁴

While French colonial censorship was strict, prohibiting any overt discussion of politics, it was more relaxed where literature was concerned.⁵ This small measure of freedom made literature a more popular genre for writers. It was, therefore, in literature that one found the drama of individuals played out with important political and national implications. David Marr estimates that "a good proportion of the fiction, drama, and poetry was written with quite serious social, political and cultural objectives in mind."⁶ In prose fiction and reportage/documentary writing Northern Vietnamese intellectuals had an opportunity to explore and make sense of the modernization and globalization forces that were changing their society.

By the 1930s many of the intellectuals had been educated in French or Franco-Vietnamese schools, where they would have been deeply immersed in Western thoughts and literature.⁷ The Vietnamese writers examined in this chapter were strongly influenced by Western literary trends. The Self-Reliance writer Nhat Linh's favourite French author was André Gide, whose influence can be detected in his novel, *Nang thu* (Autumn sun).⁸ Pham The Ngu noted that Nhat Linh's novel *Doi Ban* (Two friends) bore the influence both of Gide and of

⁴ Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien. Van hoc hien dai, 1862-1945* [The new and concise history of Vietnam's Literature. Modern literature], vol. III. Saigon: Quoc hoc tung thu, 1965, p. 505.

⁵ Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution*. Cambridge: MIT press, 1973, p. xv.

⁶ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 51.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁸ Greg Lockhart, introduction to "Broken Journey: Nhat Linh's 'Going to France'", *East Asian History*, 8 (December 1994), p. 82.

Dostoevsky.⁹ Realist writer Nguyen Hong credited Maxim Gorky and Charles Dickens as his literary influences.¹⁰ The first generation of Vietnamese fiction writers, therefore, held the curious position in society, not unlike that of other Asian and African nationalists, of trying to formulate or construct a national perspective from a standpoint of cultural and intellectual hybridity. These writers, in their 'problemization' of colonial poverty, adapted the tools of the colonizers--the modern novel and short stories--to launch their attack on colonial rule and to suggest a vision of national unity and independence.

A remarkable feature of the literature and investigative journalism that emerged in the 1930s and particularly in the 1940s was the attention given to portrayals of the lives of the poor. The literary interest in the poor had a global precedent in the works of writers such as John Steinbeck and George Orwell.¹¹ The economic downturn resulting from the Great Depression provided material for Steinbeck's stories of rural poverty, just as it did for Vietnamese writers. Indochina was not spared the negative affects of the 1930s Great Depression, which brought about considerable unemployment, and a decline in the standard of living for many middle-class families. Taken as a whole, the literature of this period reflects an attempt by socially conscious Vietnamese intellectuals to grapple with social issues such as drug addiction, prostitution, and familial disintegration, all of which were related to poverty. In other words, the authors were articulating and 'problematizing' the poverty that surrounded them. Poverty

⁹ Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III, p. 463.

¹⁰ Greg Lockhart, *the Light of the Capital: Three Modern Vietnamese Classics*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

was no longer a problem only for the individual, but one that affected both society and nation. Greg Lockhart suggests that the categories of society and nation as they were used in early twentieth-century Vietnam were new, reflecting the enormous socio-psychological transformation that accompanied colonization and the collapse of the Vietnamese monarchical and moral order.¹² Even while Northern Vietnamese intellectuals were presenting poverty as a new social problem, their critiques were based on traditional Confucian morality. Like the journalists of collaborating publications such as *Trung Bac tan van* (see Chapter Five) who were urging the elite to resume its Confucian duty vis-à-vis the poor, the prose fiction writers were calling for a return to Confucian ethical and moral behaviour toward the poor.

For the sake of organization, I will discuss the writings on poverty as produced in Northern Vietnam in two general groups. The first group is the bourgeois liberal *Tu Luc Van Doan* (translated as the Self-Reliance Literary Group); the second is the social realist writers, which includes both fiction and *phong su* (reportage/documentary) writers. The boundaries for these groups are of course flexible and porous. Thach Lam, a member of the Self-Reliance group, for example, also wrote an investigative report on the urban poor.¹³ While the Self-Reliance Literary Group was an actual association which functioned openly with its own manifestos and activities, the other group of writers did not exist as a

¹² Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989, ch. 2.

¹³ Thach Lam co-wrote the reportage under the pen name, Viet Sinh, "*Ha noi ban dem*" [Hanoi by Night], serialized in *Phong Hoa*, 1933. This reference was taken from Lockhart, "Introduction", *The Light of the Capital*, p. 44.

formal organization or even as loose *ad hoc* association, but only as a construct of academic studies.¹⁴

The works discussed in this chapter were chosen because, first and most importantly, they describe or focus on poverty. Other influencing factors were the authors' popularity during that time, and my ability to obtain copies of that particular piece of work. More overtly left-wing anti-colonial literature and political treaties will be discussed in Chapter Seven. The writings examined in this chapter, because of their literary nature and subtle critique of colonialism, passed French censorship and were openly distributed and widely read. This chapter is not a study of Vietnamese literature, either in nature or scope. It is an examination of how some prominent intellectuals/writers from the North perceived and represented poverty and the poor. Limited by space and time, I

¹⁴ As academic constructs, these categories have been defined in different ways by different scholars. Vu Ngoc Phan, for example, discussed Thach Lam's work in the section for social novels (*tiểu thuyết xã hội*), Khai Hung as a writer about customs, and Nguyen Cong Hoan as a realist writer (Vu Ngoc Phan, *Nhà văn hiện đại: Phê bình văn học* [Modern writers: Literary criticism], five volumes. Glendale: Dai Nam, n.d. First published by Tan Dan, Hanoi, 1942). Pham The Ngu divided the literature of the 1930s into two main groups according to their publishers: The Self-Reliance group's Ngay Nay publishing house and the Tan Dan press. Although Pham The Ngu discussed Nguyen Cong Hoan, Vu Trong Phung, Lan Khai, and Le Van Truong as writers of the Tan Dan group, he admitted that no such group ever existed (Pham The Ngu, *Việt Nam văn học sử giản lược tân biên*, vol. III). Maurice Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan categorize the Self-Reliance writers along with Nguyen Cong Hoan, To Hoai, Vu Trong Phung, Ngo Tat To and others under one group, which they called the "Socialist-realist" (*An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 179). Hue-Tam Ho Tai, however, uses this term, "socialist realist" as a category for the literature that dominated North Vietnam after the communist revolution. Tai, along with Vietnamese literature specialists, such as Nguyen Dang Manh, classify the literature that flourished in the 1930s focusing on social issues, such as poverty and inequity, as critical realist [*hiện thực phê phán*]. See Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Duong Thu Huong and the Literature of Disenchantment", *Vietnam Forum*, 14 (1993), pp. 89-90; Nguyen Dang Manh, "Về tác phẩm 'Tác den' của Ngo Tat To", in Ho Si Hiep, ed., *Ngo Tat To, Nguyen Huy Tuong, To Hoai*. Ho Chi Minh city: Van Nghe, 1997, p. 42.

will examine only a small sampling of the vast amount of works produced in this period.¹⁵

Readers may notice the exclusion of poetry from this discussion. Poetry has a long and important history in Vietnamese literature, and until the advent of *quoc ngu* Vietnamese literature was comprised of verse narratives and poems. As already mentioned above, prose became a popular form of writing only in the twentieth century with the rise of *quoc ngu* and the influence of Western literature.¹⁶ Up until the twentieth century, poetry covered a range of subjects and themes that contained moralizing messages, expressions of sentiments, or commentaries (often satirical) on society and politics.¹⁷ With the loss of their country to French colonialism, poets such as Nguyen Dinh Chieu (1822-1888), Nguyen Khuyen (1835-1909), and Tran Te Xuong (1870-1907) relied on poetry, sometimes cloaked in satire, to voice their political dissent.¹⁸ In the early years of the twentieth century, however, satirical and political poems were censored and discouraged by the French-controlled presses and publications. Pham The Ngu remarked that French-collaborating publications such as *Nam Phong* and *Dong Duong tap chi* were not interested in publishing poems lamenting the loss of national soul or poems ridiculing corrupt officials.¹⁹ In 1932 the New Poetry movement was launched and had an enormous influence on Vietnamese literary

¹⁵ For more comprehensive studies on modern Vietnamese literature, see Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III, and also Vu Ngoc Phan, *Nha van hien dai: Phe binh van hoc*.

¹⁶ Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 583.

¹⁸ Huynh Sanh Thong, *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979. See Lockhart's introduction to "Broken Journey: Nhat Linh's 'Going to France'" for the importance of satire in Vietnamese literature and the new type of satire that arose in the 1930s.

history.²⁰ The general focus of the New Poetry movement was the exploration of inner feelings and anxieties. With few exceptions--the poet Tu Mo (pen name of Ho Trong Hieu) for example, a member of the Self-Reliance group who wrote satirical poems ridiculing the 'old' ways--poems of the 1930s and 1940s dealt mainly with romantic love, beauty, and nature.²¹ Thus prose fiction and journalistic writing became the main forum for social and cultural issues, particularly those concerning the living conditions of the poor.

Images of Poverty in the Writings of the Self-Reliance Literary Group

Nguyen Tuong Tam, better known by his pen name Nhat Linh, founded the Self-Reliance group in 1933. The group's manifesto declared its commitment to bringing new, progressive egalitarian ideas to Vietnamese society. The Self-Reliance group advocated individual freedom (for men *and* women), condemned Confucianism and superstition, and sought to simplify the Vietnamese writing style.²² To this end, the Group published two journals *Phong Hoa* (Customs) and *Ngay Nay* (This Day), and ran a publishing house, Doi Nay (Life Today), which they used to disseminate the group's ideas for cultural and literary reform. *Phong Hoa* was controlled and published by Nhat Linh and the Self-Reliance group from 1932 until the French authorities shut it down in 1936.²³ Partly modeled on the French journal *Le Rire*, *Phong Hoa* was immensely popular, particularly for its

¹⁹ Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III, p. 395.

²⁰ Maurice Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan, *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*, p. 120.

²¹ Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III, ch. IV.

²² Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976, p. 88.

²³ Lockhart, Introduction to "Broken Journey: Nhat Linh's 'Going to France'", p. 93.

satire.²⁴ Pham The Ngu wrote that when *Phong Hoa*, the first satirical periodical in Vietnam, was initially published, it "exploded like a bomb", bringing laughter to the society.²⁵ *Ngay Nay*, a much more "artistic and lavish" magazine than *Phong Hoa*, was produced in 1935 during the time when the Self-Reliance group's popularity and influence were on the wane.²⁶

Much of the writing of the Western-educated, urban middle-class liberal intellectuals of the Self-Reliance Literary group attacked what they considered to be antiquated and stifling Confucian practices, such as arranged marriages and polygamy.²⁷ Their protagonists were usually middle class, educated young men and women who were suffocating from the weight of traditional expectations and restrictions. Common problems facing the main characters included lack of freedom to love, to create, or to develop one's potential. Greg Lockhart suggests that by focusing its attack on traditional customs (something seemingly apolitical) the Self-Reliance group was making an "oblique" attack on French colonial rule, which "sought to maintain traditional customs in the perceived interests of political and social stability."²⁸ Some short stories and novels of the Self-Reliance group, however, focused directly on the poverty and injustices that ordinary peasants and workers endured in their daily lives. These stories were even stronger statements against the destruction and the contradictions of colonialism.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III, p. 441.

²⁶ Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan, *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*, p. 161; see also Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 158.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Lockhart, introduction to "Broken Journey", p. 76.

Feelings of guilt pervade the Self-Reliance group's stories on poverty; guilt felt by children of the rich when confronted with the miseries of their compatriots.²⁹ Stories such as Nhat Linh's "Hai ve dep" (Two aspects of beauty), or Thach Lam's "Mot con gian" (A fit of anger) attested to the authors' anguish over their privileged lives in comparison to the lives of rural and urban labourers.³⁰ Without a doubt, members of the group were educated urbanites of the privileged class. Khai Hung (pen name of Tran Khanh Giu), whose romantic novels were highly popular among youth, was the son of a mandarin province chief. Up to the age of twelve, Khai Hung studied the Confucian classics, and later was given a Western education at the Albert Sarraut lycee, a school reserved for children of French and mandarin families. In 1931 Khai Hung began teaching at the famous Thang Long private school.³¹

Nhat Linh, the main architect of the group, and his brothers, writers Thach Lam (Nguyen Tuong Lan) and Hoang Dao (Nguyen Tuong Long), were born into a civil servant family with mandarin roots. With the death of their father, their family fortune declined to the extent that Nhat Linh had to quit school to help his family. With assistance from relatives, however, Nhat Linh was able to return to school; he and his brothers were able to attend the prestigious Franco-Vietnamese school in Hanoi.³² While Nhat Linh's family might have had financial difficulties, they were privileged enough that Nhat Linh was able to avoid holding

²⁹ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 250.

³⁰ "Hai ve dep" will be discussed in more details below. "Mot con gian" (1937) is about a rich Vietnamese man, who, in a fit of anger, inadvertently caused the complete destitution of a rickshaw man and his family. *Thach Lam truyện ngắn chọn lọc* [Selected short stories of Thach Lam], compiled by Tran Manh Thuong. Hanoi: Hoi Nha Van, 1996, pp. 27-35.

³¹ Ho Si Hiep, *Khai Hung, Thach Lam*. Ho Chi Minh city: Van Nghe, 1996, pp. 9-10.

³² Lockhart, introduction to "Broken Journey", p. 78.

down a regular job and could follow his personal whims. After graduating from school Nhat Linh worked as a clerk for several years, but quickly became bored. In 1925 he entered medical school, then transferred into the school of fine arts, where he studied under the French painter Victor Tardieu.³³ In 1927 after having married a woman from a commercial family, Nhat Linh went to France on a scholarship to study science for three years, leaving behind his newly married wife and his domestic responsibilities.

In his reminiscence of his childhood, Nhat Linh's youngest brother, Nguyen Tuong Bach, emphasizes their family's modest and rural background. Bach, who was trained as a medical doctor, writes that he and his brothers were born in a poor district town, surrounded by rice fields and mountains.³⁴ Bach relates that Nhat Linh lived very simply, preferring to eat like a poor peasant, consuming such simple things as rice and salted sesame seed mixture.³⁵ This desire to be close to the common people and to emulate their lifestyle was probably carried out with greatest enthusiasm by Thach Lam. After he was married, Thach Lam moved into a simple hut with a thatched roof in a village near Hanoi's West Lake.³⁶ He was reported to have told friends that although he could build a fancy brick house he preferred to live simply, in his own chosen poverty. As a friend of Thach Lam recorded, Thach Lam often claimed:

To be able live in a thatched hut, sleep on a bamboo
bed, eat bean greens, and yet still find beauty in the

³³ Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III, pp. 430-431.

³⁴ Nguyen Tuong Bach, "Nhat Linh, nhung ngay Ha Noi va tai hoi nghi Hong Kong '47" [Nhat Linh, Hanoi days and at the Hong Kong conference '47], *Khoi Hanh*. 5, 57 (July 2001), Santa Ana, California, pp. 20. The article was an address Bach made at the 31st death anniversary of Nhat Linh in July 7, 1994, Westminster, California.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Ho Si Hiep, ed., *Khai Hung, Thach Lam*, p. 64.

thatched roof, softness in the bamboo bed, and
tastiness in the bean greens, is to know how to live
artistically.³⁷

This romanticized perception of rural poverty can easily be detected in writings of the Self-Reliance members. While Nhat Linh and other Self-Reliance writers were no doubt sincere in their concerns for the plight of poor people, their romantic portrayal of poverty suggests a gap between their imagined poverty and reality.

The fact that the Self-Reliance writers tried to be 'like' the peasants, demonstrates how distant they actually were from Vietnam's rural culture. Alexander Woodside commenting on the mass exodus of educated youths from the villages during the early twentieth century, notes "[n]owhere was the problem of the separation of the intelligentsia, and of intellectual youths, from agricultural problems more acute than in Tonkin."³⁸ Being removed from the experience of poverty, the Self-Reliance writers, like the journalists who wrote about charity in collaborating newspapers (see Chapter Five), were presenting their own imagined portrait of poverty, a sympathetic one-dimensional picture of the rural poor. A few stories written by Nhat Linh, Khai Hung, and Thach Lam will be discussed below. These stories, with their heavy reliance on the traditional trope of woman as nation, illustrate the authors' sense of guilt, compassion, and powerlessness when dealing with deprivation of their society. The authors' portrayal of women and use of feminine imagery also serve to reinforce the

³⁷ As recorded in Dinh Hung's memoir, quoted by Ho Si Hiep, *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁸ Woodside, *Community and Revolution*, pp. 126-127.

implicit message that poverty was a new social problem connected to colonialism.

Nhat Linh's story, "Dau duong xo cho" (In the streets)³⁹ is about a society in a downward spiral. The narrator of this story, a thirteen-year old boy, lived with his brothers and sisters who ran an opium franchise of the state. The narrator and his siblings had been living in wealth and comfort as children of a mandarin, but when their father died they had to leave their native village to seek a living elsewhere. They were now forced to live among the poor, among the "lowly" households ("*gia dinh hen ha*"), profiting from the latter's drug addiction. The frequent use of adjectives such as "lowly" (*hen ha*) in connection with the poor reinforces the theme of the story: poverty is not just about the lack of material things, but a cultural and spiritual deprivation. The narrator described the poverty surrounding him and stated: "It is truly a wicked society, but it is wicked because it is so poor."⁴⁰

To demonstrate the connection between poverty and moral deterioration the narrator related an incident concerning his neighbour, Mrs. Hien, whose husband pulled a rickshaw for a living. The narrator expressed sympathy for his young and beautiful neighbour who had the misfortune to be married to an opium-addicted, ugly man. Mrs. Hien, however, did not dwell on her poverty and bad luck; instead, she spent her days working on her weaving to earn extra money, which she spent on opium to please her husband. The narrator stated:

³⁹ Nhat Linh, "Dau duong xo cho", in Nhat Linh and Khai Hung, *Anh phai song*. Reprint, Ho Chi Minh city: Van Nghe, [n.d., circa 1999] pp. 121-129. The short-story collection was first published in 1937 by Doi Nay, Hanoi.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122

"She does not think about her own self. Her brown shirt is faded and has patches on the arms, shoulders and back, yet she would not save money for a new shirt."⁴¹ Mrs. Hien was obedient and loyal to her husband, fulfilling her role in the Confucian order. Her husband, however, a slave to opium, was unable to do the same. He took from her and gave nothing back. Exploited and subservient, Mrs. Hien was like the country itself, caught in its own traditions and unable to free itself from its colonial master.

Nhat Linh's "Nuoc chay doi dong"⁴² (Water runs in parallel streams) also features a poor and beautiful female character, who was seemingly unaware of the injustice of her life situation. The story was told from the point of view of Sinh, son of a mandarin. On a leisure trip Sinh met Duyen, a strikingly beautiful daughter of the owners of a ferryboat. Sinh was overcome with pity that such an elegant (*thanh tao*) girl should live in poverty. Ten years later he met up with her again. Now both he and Duyen had families of their own. Duyen did not recognize or remember their brief encounter years before. Sinh, however, remembered her clearly and noted that she was still beautiful. He lamented:

Oh life! This is how some people's lives are!
And that's all they have! One thought that a beautiful
girl would be unable to live in poverty and baseness
(*ngheo hen*), and thus one feels pity and
sympathy...but this beautiful girl whom one pities
doesn't know that she is suffering, she never thinks to
ask if she is suffering. Indifferent and unmoved, she
lives according to her life situation...like the river
water flowing in the riverbed.⁴³

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴² Nhat Linh, "Nuoc chay doi dong", in Nhat Linh and Khai Hung, *Anh phai song*, pp. 130-140.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

This passive image of the poor is again presented by Nhat Linh in "Hai ve dep" (Two aspects of beauty),⁴⁴ a short story about a young educated man, Doan, coming to terms with his new awareness that his comfortable life was gained through the exploitation of poor peasants. After his return from France, where he had studied law, Doan was living with his foster mother in the countryside, completely absorbed by his art. With great detachment from the hardship of the peasants, Doan spent his days painting, trying only to capture the beauty of the rural scenery and its people for his own pleasure. His idyllic view of the countryside was shattered when, one sleepless night, he began reading a novel, something he had not done before. This exposure to literature made him socially conscious, and as a result he became less selfish in his artistic work. He committed himself to help others find beauty in their lives.

With his new consciousness, Doan had no choice but to act; Doan was committed to bringing enlightenment to the people, like a responsible Confucian gentleman. Doan concluded that the unending cycle of poverty that seemed unchanged since his childhood, was the result of lack of knowledge:

[T]hese people suffered and lived in dark night because they had no one to enlighten them, to teach them to live any other way and make them long for a finer life.⁴⁵

What exactly Doan will or can do to make the peasants' lives "finer" is left vague.

In this story, both the rich and poor--the exploiter and exploited--were portrayed as being unaware of their situation. As a consequence, it fell upon the

⁴⁴ "Hai ve dep" was first published in Nhat Linh, *Toi Tam* [Darkness]. Hanoi: Doi Nay, 1936. The version I used ("Two Beauties") is a translated one found in James Banerian, *Vietnamese Short Stories*. Phoenix: Sphinx Publishing, 1986, pp. 37-57.

shoulders of enlightened people such as Doan to make them aware, so that the cycle of exploitation could be stopped. In a similar fashion, the ferry girl in "Nuoc chay doi dong" was presented as being unaware of and indifferent to her poverty. This portrayal perhaps reflects Nhat Linh's personal view on poor relief; that it is the moral duty of the modern educated people, like Doan, to make people conscious of their own oppression. In 1937 Nhat Linh along with Hoang Dao, and Khai Hung organized a charity to help the poor with housing in the outskirts of Hanoi.⁴⁶ Noteworthy is the name the charity: Hoi anh sang (Beam of light), a name that invokes the image of enlightenment and improvement coming from the intellectual class. Like the journalists writing about charity in the conservative Northern newspapers, Nhat Linh was emphasizing the elite's duty to perform the task of poor relief--a reinstatement of Confucian social responsibility.

In the Self-Reliance literature about rural and urban poverty, female characters feature prominently and heroically. The poor women in Nhat Linh's short stories were hard working and self-sacrificing. These qualities continue even now to be idealized as desirable traits of a 'good' Vietnamese woman by the present Vietnamese government.⁴⁷ Although these female characters were admirable, they were also victims, and worse, they were passive, indifferent victims. In "Hai ve dep", Nhat Linh's polarized representation of Doan's two mothers, his deceased, poor, biological mother and his wealthy foster mother, could be seen as symbolic of a native mother country overtaken and exploited by

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴⁶ Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 158.

⁴⁷ Lisa B.W. Drummond, *Mapping Modernity: Perspectives on Everyday Life in Vietnam's Urbanizing Society*. PhD dissertation, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1999, ch. 3.

an 'advanced' foreign nation. This symbolic use of woman/mother as nation was Nhat Linh's way of critiquing French colonial rule, which although it provided some benefits for the wealthy collaborating class, also created an environment in which exploitation and moral degradation flourished. It also dramatized Doan's (and by extension, Nhat Linh's) ambivalence and uneasiness with his bicultural heritage--his hybrid identity.

The homage to the self-sacrificing woman was again featured in "Anh phai song"⁴⁸ (Darling, you must live), a short story written by Khai Hung. This is a tragic story about a poor woman who chose death in order to save her family. The main characters in this story, Mr. Thuc and his wife, left their three hungry children at home one day to go out in their boat to collect drift wood. The river was particularly high, and the boat overturned and both fell out. Mrs. Thuc could not swim and had to depend on her husband's help. When he became tired, she decided it would be better to die so that her husband would still have a chance to live and to take care of their children, the youngest one was still a nursing baby. Against her husband's protests, she let go and drowned. It is a classic example of maternal sacrifice, a sacrifice that she had to face because of poverty. Khai Hung portrayed Mrs. Thuc as a 'simple peasant' whose mind did not know how to imagine, or how to think in an orderly way.⁴⁹ She was, nevertheless, a loving and hard working mother and wife, whose tragic fate was effectively and movingly presented.

⁴⁸ Khai Hung, "Anh phai song", in Nhat Linh and Khai Hung, *Anh phai song*. Hanoi: Doi Nay (n.d., circa the early 1930s), pp. 5-13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Rousing readers' sympathy and indignation was the goal of Thach Lam's collection of short stories, *Gio dau mua* (The first wind of the season).⁵⁰ In the preface to the collection, Thach Lam stated that with his writing he wanted to describe the "moving and interesting" truths of life:

I do not want to tell stories of deities and immortals (*than tien*) or romantic tales, but to relate my impressions of the discreet and simple life around me. Because for me, literature is not a way for readers to escape or forget; on the contrary, literature is a noble and able weapon that we have for both exposing and changing a world that is deceitful and cruel, and to make people's heart purer and richer.⁵¹

Thach Lam was the most prolific of the Self-Reliance group in writing about the lives of the lower-middle class and those in absolute poverty. In *Gio dau mua* and in his subsequent short story collections *Nang trong vuon* (Sunlight in the garden, 1938) and *Soi toc* (A strand of hair, 1942)⁵² Thach Lam showed a keen interest in understanding the lives of ordinary and poor people in his society. Pham The Ngu stated that Thach Lam was not especially concerned, as Nhat Linh and Khai Hung were, with propagandizing social revolution, but was more interested in telling life stories of the poor.⁵³ Although Thach Lam's stories are less moralizing than Nhat Linh's and Khai Hung's works, his portrayal of the poor is similar in its gentle and romantic treatment of poverty, and particularly of rural poverty. There is a clear message in Thach Lam's writings: rural life with its simplicity and poverty is preferable because the rural poor are still morally-

⁵⁰ Thach Lam, *Gio dau mua*. Ha Noi: Doi Nay, 1937.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵² A selection of stories from all three collections (all originally published by Doi Nay) were reprinted recently. *Thach Lam truyện ngắn*. Ha Noi: Hoi Nha Van, 1996.

upright, honest, and kind, unlike the superficial, mean urban rich people. Like Nhat Linh and Khai Hung, Thach Lam drew attention to the hardship women suffered in shouldering the responsibility of meeting their families' needs.

Thach Lam's "Nha me Le" (Mrs. Le),⁵⁴ a moving short story about Mrs. Le and her eleven children living in abject squalor, typifies how the author represented rural poverty. In the beginning of the story Thach Lam described how Mrs. Le (a widow) and her children survived day-to-day. They lived among other poor transitory people on the edge of town, making a living from casual work on farms and in the market. Thach Lam showed that the Le family was a loving, hard working family that had difficult as well as happy times. In the latter part of the story, Thach Lam described the family's situation deteriorating as they became even poorer. This story was published in 1937, and what Thach Lam chronicled in the second part of the story perhaps reflects the economic hardship of the early 1930s connected with the Great Depression, and the deterioration of Vietnamese society under French colonialism. As casual farm work became scarce and as marketing activities began to shift to a more urbanized centre, Mrs Le was having difficulty finding work. People's attitudes and values were changing. Her eldest son used to go fishing in neighbouring rice fields, but could no longer do so, as the increasing commercialization of the economy made private property a sacred thing. The story ends with Mrs. Le dying from a vicious dog attack. A rich landlord let loose his dog on her when she came begging for

⁵³ Pham The Ngu, *Vietnam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III, p. 490.

⁵⁴ Thach Lam, "Nha Me Le", *Thach Lam truyen ngan chon loc*, pp. 85-93. The story was first published in *Gio dau mua*, Hanoi: Doi nay, 1937.

food. It is significant to note that the dog that attacked and killed Mrs. Le was a French dog.

The hardship endured by rural poor women is again highlighted in the short story, "Co hang xen" (The market girl).⁵⁵ The story tells of the difficult life of a young woman Tam, whose life was completely devoted to supporting her own and later her husband's family. Tam left school when her family encountered financial difficulties, and when her father stopped teaching because of failing eyesight. The family of five subsisted on little more than one *mau* (0.36 hectare) of rice field and Tam's earnings from selling miscellaneous wares such as thread, buttons, and pens. Tam's father, Mr. Tu, no longer the main breadwinner, shirked all other familial responsibilities. He spent his time visiting friends and did not even want to be involved in finding a husband for Tam. Despite this, her home life was warm and loving, all to the credit of Tam's mother, who was a gentle and kind woman. Unselfishly, Mrs. Tu married Tam off to a poor village teacher, even though it meant financial uncertainty for Mrs. Tu and her two remaining children. Tam did not want to leave her family who relied on her for so much. However, a filial daughter, Tam agreed to the match. Marriage did not improve Tam's life, and in fact even added to her burden. She now had to support two families with her marketing activity.

The fate of Tam was not uncommon. Tam comforted herself with the thought that all the other women she knew, also worked hard all their lives to

⁵⁵ Thach Lam, "Co hang xen", *Thach Lam truyện ngắn chọn lọc*, pp. 183-200. The story was first published in *Soi toc*, Hanoi: Doi Nay, 1942.

support their families. The unending hardship was all Tam expected of her life.

The story ends with her returning in the evening to her husband's village:

The black ring from the rows of bamboo of Bang village suddenly appeared in front of her, dark and thick. With sadness Tam saw clearly her entire life; a life of a market girl from young until old, completely filled with hardship and worries...She lowered her head and walked quickly into the dark alley.⁵⁶

In the short story "Doi"⁵⁷ (Hunger) Thach Lam examined the dehumanizing effects of poverty. The story centres around a young couple who recently became poor, after the husband, Sinh, lost his job. They pawned most of their furniture and belongings. They had been subsisting on some rice, but it ran out and for two days they had been going without food. Sinh's loving and faithful wife, Mai, had been trying without any success to borrow money from friends and acquaintances. Early on in the story, it was revealed that when Sinh first met Mai, she had been working as a prostitute, and that there had been much familial protest against their marriage.

That afternoon, when Mai was out trying once again to borrow money, Sinh stayed home dealing with his hunger. The neighbours were cooking their supper and the aromas were unbearable for Sinh. Never in his life had he wanted anything more than the way he wanted his neighbours' simple meal. In the past he had heard of incidents where people fought each other for food, and at that time he had despised them, thinking that it was more important to nurture a "noble and pure" spirit. When Mai returned home she was carrying packages of food bought at expensive French shops. She explained that an old female

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

acquaintance had loaned her the money and promised to help her with some capital so she could start on selling areca nuts. Overjoyed, Sinh was about to eat the delicious French-style meats and cakes, when a note fell out of Mai's pocket revealing that she got the money through prostitution. Furious, Sinh threw the food on the floor, and told her he never wanted to see her again. After begging for his forgiveness without success, Mai ran out of the apartment in tears. As Sinh's anger subsided, he was overcome with hunger and began devouring all the ill-gotten food like an animal:

Sinh ate quickly, no time to chew or swallow. Holding tightly onto the meat, sticky with grease, without thinking about anything, he shoved it continually into his mouth.⁵⁸

With this story Thach Lam exposed well-to-do readers to an experience of hunger so powerful that it reduced an ordinary self-respecting person, such as Sinh, to behaving like an animal. The readers also see how deprivation drove a faithful wife to prostitution.

Like the female characters in the stories examined thus far, Mai in the story "Doi" willingly sacrificed herself for the welfare of her husband. The female characters in Thach Lam's as well as Nhat Linh's and Khai Hung's works played crucial roles in keeping the family together during times of poverty. Mrs. Le and Tam the market girl were the main breadwinners for their families. Thach Lam portrayed them as the ideal Vietnamese woman: hard working, loving, good natured and, most of all, willing to sacrifice herself for others. Khai Hung's Mrs.

⁵⁷ Thach Lam, "Doi", *Thach Lam truyện ngắn chọn lọc*, pp. 36-47.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Thuc (in "Anh phai song") deliberately gave up her life for the sake of her children. Mrs. Hien of Nhat Linh's story, "Dau duong xo cho", also embodied some of the qualities that were idealized and associated with femininity in Vietnamese culture, such as loyalty to her opium-addicted husband, and resourcefulness in trying to come up with money to help him with his habit. Mrs. Hien (like Mai) was basically a good woman, tainted by the poverty and depravity around her. These female characters were portrayed with sympathy and with admiration for their strength and endurance. They were victims of poverty, and of a degenerating society in which there was a remarkable absence of men willing or able to shoulder some of the responsibilities. Death, opium addiction, or disinterest (on the husband's part) had made the woman the sole breadwinner for the family.

One sees the use of woman as admirable victim not only in the Self-Reliance stories, but also in other Vietnamese literary and historical writings, from the legend of the warrior Trung sisters to Nguyen Du's famous *Tale of Kieu*.⁵⁹ These legendary women and the feminine characteristics of perseverance and self-sacrifice, had been mythologized in the Vietnamese national-self image.⁶⁰ With a long history of foreign invasions and occupations, one conventional and enduring national self-image features Vietnam as a physically weak and small country, but one strong in ethnic solidarity, loyalty, and morality. Thus the literary use of the woman as a metaphor for nation was

⁵⁹ By the 1930s Kieu, the main protagonist from Nguyen Du's famous story [*The Tale of Kieu*] had become a "symbol of the disintegration of the Vietnamese nation." See Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 109.

pervasive in traditional literature and poetry; depicting woman/nation as vulnerable, but pure and loyal, qualities which in the end would prevail over injustice. It is ironic that the Self-Reliance writers, who attacked the traditional ways, themselves invoked this conventional image of women in their writings about the poor.

The Self-Reliance writers, as the first generation of Vietnamese modern fiction writers, could not escape their bicultural heritage. With one foot in the Vietnamese and one in the Western cultural world, intellectuals like Khai Hung, whose own wife was described as "still maintaining the Confucian custom with a set of black-dyed teeth"⁶¹, were cultural *métis*.⁶² They were the progeny of an unequal and forced union of Vietnamese and French cultures. This transculturalism can be detected in their works, which had the outer appearance of being thoroughly Westernized. Hue-Tam Ho Tai states that despite "the self-proclaimed modern outlook of the Self-Reliance Literary Group,...the novel [Khai Hung's] also showed clear evidence of the influence of late Ch'ing fiction."⁶³ Tai points out that the ending of Khai Hung's novel *Nua chung xuan* (In mid-spring) resembles that of Nguyen Du's Vietnamese classic, *The Story of Kieu*. Moreover, Tai also saw influences from Qing fiction in Nhat Linh's *Nang thu* (Autumnal sun), while others had commented on its similarity to André Gide's *La*

⁶⁰ Lisa B.W. Drummond, *Mapping Modernity: Perspectives on Everyday Life in Vietnam's Urbanizing Society*, ch. 3.

⁶¹ Si Ho Hiep, *Khai Hung*, *Thach Lam*, p. 9.

⁶² Françoise Lionnet, "'Logiques métisses': Cultural Appropriation and Postcolonial Representations", in Kostas Myrsiades and Jerry McGuire, eds., *Order and Partialities: Theory, Pedagogy and the "Postcolonial"*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 111-136.

⁶³ Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 252.

symphonie pastorale.⁶⁴ In a similar fashion, traces of Confucian elitism and values were embedded in the Self-Reliance short stories about the poor. In their writings on the plight of the poor the Self-Reliance members were using the traditional trope of woman as nation to reinforce Confucian values such as loyalty, perseverance, ethical conduct, and social responsibility.

Therefore, by depicting the predicaments and hardship of the poor in a gendered manner, with poverty and vulnerability connected with femininity, these stories did more than attack the injustices of the society. These stories reminded educated urban readers of their nation in crisis. This was a subtle indictment of French colonial rule, which promised progress and modernization with its 'civilizing' mission while peddling alcohol and opium and, at the same time, impoverishing the Vietnamese with heavy taxes, increasing landlessness and unemployment. Moreover, by depicting the poor as passive, feminine victims the Self-Reliance writers were perhaps positioning themselves--active and modern--as the moral authority over the poor peasants.

Class, Poverty, and Social Realism

The second group of writers that will be examined became popular in the mid-1930s and early 1940s. Social realist writers such as Nguyen Cong Hoan, and Nguyen Hong wrote about social injustices, cruel treatment of the poor by the rich, and the lack of humanity among people in both urban and rural settings. Tam Lang's documentary work on rickshaw men will be included here, even though it is technically not of the fiction genre. Nevertheless, the attempts of the

⁶⁴ Lockhart, Introduction to "Broken Journey", p. 82.

social realist writers to capture and relate the truths about their society render their fictitious stories close in theme and spirit to the investigative reporting of Tam Lang.

In contrast to the Self-Reliance group, the social realist writers were more class-conscious and less romantic, particularly when writing about poverty and village life. The social realist writers examined here were from the lower-middle class. In their stories there is less moralizing, and more bitterness and outrage about the injustice and misery to which they bore witness. Although there is a strong element of class-consciousness in the writings of these authors, the poor were not idealized. Both rich and poor were capable of utter cruelty and brutality toward their fellow human beings. Moreover, these are not works calling for social revolution or class warfare, but a call for more kindness and humanism in people's behaviour. On a larger scale, by portraying the misery of the poor, these writers, like the Self-Reliance writers, were also critiquing colonial society. However, in contrast to the Self-Reliance writers who tended to assign admirable feminine characteristics to the poor, the social-realist writers represented poverty as a dignity-destroying process in which the destitute person was stripped of self-respect and humanity. The implication was that colonization dehumanized Vietnam by destroying the traditional moral order while leaving nothing in its place.

This section will begin with the works of Nguyen Cong Hoan, who first began writing in 1920 at the age of seventeen.⁶⁵ Born in 1903 in Hung Yen province, Hoan was the son of a mandarin in charge of education for a district.

As a boy, Hoan was taught Chinese by his paternal grandmother. Despite their mandarin background, his biographers assert that his family was poor. As a result, Hoan was sent to live with his uncle who was district chief.⁶⁶ In 1926 Hoan graduated from the teachers' college and began a life of teaching and writing. One writer suggests that because Hoan tended to offend local mandarins and officials he was shipped frequently from one school to another in the remote regions.⁶⁷ Hoan began his political involvement in 1928 when he joined the *Viet Nam quoc dan dang* (Vietnamese Nationalist Part) of Nguyen Thai Hoc. By the mid-1930s, after he had become a well-known writer and more involved in anti-colonial activities, the authorities began to notice and harass him. In 1938 his novel, *Buoc dung cung* (Dead end) was banned, and in the year following, another novel, *Cai thu lon* (The pig's head) and many of his short stories were banned.⁶⁸ In the 1940s Hoan joined the Viet Minh (the communist-led anti-colonial coalition force) and after 1954 he remained a prominent writer in North Vietnam.

A prolific writer, Hoan had already written eighty short stories and nine novels by 1935.⁶⁹ In his earlier stories, which were more widely read because they were not banned, he simply related the injustices and cruelty of colonial life. Hoan's stories were hugely popular because they were often satirical and funny.

⁶⁵ Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Nguyen Cong Hoan: Cay but hien thuc xuat sac*, pp. 435-437.

⁶⁶ N. I. Niculin, "Nha van Nguyen Cong Hoan" (The writer Nguyen Cong Hoan), p. 82; Nguyen Hoanh Khung, "Nguyen Cong Hoan (1903-1977)" in Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Nguyen Cong Hoan: cay but hien thuc xuat sac*, p. 281.

⁶⁷ Nguyen Hoanh Khung, "Nguyen Cong Hoan", in Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III, p. 505.

His gift was his ability to present hypocrisies, contradictions, and absurdities of colonial life in a humorous manner which lightened the bleakness of his stories.⁷⁰

Vietnamese literary critics have often compared Hoan's work to those of internationally famous masters of short stories and satire, such as Anton Chekhov, Guy de Maupassant, and the Romanian dramatist, Ion Luca Caragiale.⁷¹ Hoan, however, flatly denied benefiting from any foreign influences. Perhaps this was an attempt to appear 'authentically' Vietnamese, a 'common' man, like Thach Lam living in his 'peasant' hut. One literary critic defends his 'authenticity': "...he does not just mimic or follow one European writer, even though he wrote many short stories that are just as profound and outstanding as those of the three famous writers [Caragiale, de Maupassant, and Chekhov]".⁷² A contemporary Hoang Trung Thong writes, "Nguyen Cong Hoan often told me that he does not read anybody's work. But I know he does. A person like him cannot not read Guy de Maupassant, or Anatole France..."⁷³ The Vietnamese communist theoretician Truong Chinh states that although Hoan could read French, he read very little French literature. Hoan apparently read only de Maupassant's "the Beggar", and portions of Hugo's *Les Misérables*, and Dumas' *Le Comte de Monte Cristo*.⁷⁴ According to Truong Chinh, it was almost as if he refused to be influenced by anyone. Another writer states with authority that

⁷⁰ Truong Chinh, "*Buoc duong cung tieu thuyet cua Nguyen Cong Hoan*", p. 380.

⁷¹ Phan Cu De, "Nguyen Cong Hoan", in Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Nguyen Cong Hoan: cay but hien thuc xuat sac*, p. 39. Here De was quoting an article in *Tap chi van hoc* (Literature review), No. 3, 1977.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Hoang Trung Thong, "Nguyen Cong Hoan nhu toi biet" (Nguyen Cong Hoan as I knew him), in Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Nguyen Cong Hoan: cay but hien thuc xuat sac*, pp. 148-149.

⁷⁴ Truong Chinh, "Doc tuyen tap Nguyen Cong Hoan" (Reading "The collection of Nguyen Cong Hoan"), in Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Ibid.*, pp. 330-331.

Hoan had access to left-wing material, such as *Viet Nam hon* (The soul of Vietnam), *Le Paria* (of the French Communist Party), and the works of Sun Yat Sen, Phan Boi Chau, and Lenin.⁷⁵ This same writer also relates that when Hoan was young he liked Molière's satirical plays and that he and his brothers would stage them for their parents. As these various writers attest, foreign literary influences on Hoan (or the lack of them) were of great interest to his contemporaries. They also demonstrate Hoan's awareness and fear of the overwhelming Western influences among Vietnamese intellectuals, and the gap that might exist between Vietnamese intellectuals and rest of the 'people'.

Whatever the case might have been during his intellectual and creative development, Hoan certainly had ample access to works of Western literature both in their original languages and in translation. As Nguyen Minh Chau notes, Hoan was writing in an age of cultural borrowing, when there were strong foreign influences on literature.⁷⁶ In other words, Hoan, like others of the first generation of Vietnamese fiction writers, grew up in a period in which educated intellectuals were just as familiar with Molière's plays as they were with *The Story of Kieu*. Acknowledging the transcultural nature of literary influences, however, does not in any way make Hoan less "the writer of the miserable" (*nha van cua nhung hang nguoi khon nan*), a title given to him by a contemporary literary critic.⁷⁷ His portrayal of poverty, however, like that of the Self-Reliance group, should be

⁷⁵ Nguyen Hoanh Khung, "Nguyen Cong Hoan", p. 281.

⁷⁶ Nguyen Minh Chau, "Nha van Nguyen Cong Hoan" (The writer Nguyen Cong Hoan), in Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁷⁷ Thai Phi gave him this title when he reviewed Hoan's first short story. Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su gian uoc tan bien*, vol. III, p. 505.

seen as an intellectual's imagined representation of a social problem with political and national symbolism.

Nguyen Cong Hoan's stories are often biting in their ridicule of the social climbers and the bourgeois class, as well as bold in their portrayals of human greed and cruelty. He portrayed Vietnamese society under colonialism as a merciless place for those without power or money. In his short story, "Rang con cho cua nha tu san"⁷⁸ (Teeth of a capitalist's dog) Hoan suggested that life for the poor was worse than the fate of dogs. Mocking rich Vietnamese people and their infatuation with Western things, Hoan had the dog's owner bragging about how well-mannered his dog was:

Thus we know that even the French bred dogs are truly smarter than our Annamese [Vietnamese] dogs. Annamese dogs not only have an ugly coat, but also often eat filth...⁷⁹

While the dog's owner and his guest were inside eating, a beggar appeared in the garden and tried to steal the dog's food, but the dog put up a fight. In the wrestling match between the beggar and the French dog, two of the dog's teeth were knocked out. Hearing the commotion, the dog's owner ran out into the garden. When he realized what had happened, he immediately jumped into his car vowing to catch up with the beggar and run him over. The rich man estimated that, at most, he would be fined only thirty piastres for killing the beggar. This story shows the absence of any moral or ethical principles guiding

⁷⁸ Nguyen Cong Hoan, "Rang con cho cua nha tu san" (written in 1929), *Nguyen Cong Hoan truyen ngan tuyen chon*, compiled by Le Minh. Hanoi: Van Hoc, 1996, vol 1, pp. 62-68.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

human relationships. From the rich man's point of view, the beggar's life was worth less than his dog's two front teeth.

This same theme is again related in, "Hai thang khon nan"⁸⁰ (The two wretched knaves), a story about Mr. Lan, a widower, who was impoverished by a major flood and had to resort to selling his son. With a heavy heart, Mr. Lan took his son to the rich household of Mr. Representative (the local member of the Native Chamber of People's Representative), where a negotiation ensued about the price for the boy. To the dismay of Mr. Lan, Mr. Representative first made a pitifully low offer of thirty cents, then, upon inspection of the boy, he lowered it to twenty-eight cents. Even though he was torn up about the sale, Mr. Lan, when given an opportunity to void the transaction, decided to not do so and chose instead to satisfy his own hunger. This story shows how everything, even one's own children, could become a commodity to be bought and sold. It also highlights the disintegration of one of the three sacred Confucian bonds--the bond between father and son.

Similar messages about the lack of humanity, filial piety, and ethical conduct can be found in Hoan's other fiction of the 1930s and 1940s. The stories "Bao hieu: tra nghia cha" and "Bao hieu: tra nghia me"⁸¹ tell of a rich company owner and his wife who made an ostentatious public display of grief at the funeral for the rich man's father. At the same time, however, they mistreated the man's

⁸⁰ Nguyen Cong Hoan, "Hai thang khon nan" (written in 1930), *Nguyen Cong Hoan truyen ngan tuyen chon*, pp. 79-83.

⁸¹ Translated as "Announcing one's filial piety: repaying one's father's devotion", and "Announcing one's filial piety: repaying one's mother's devotion", written in 1933, in *Nguyen Cong Hoan truyen ngan tuyen chon*, pp. 213-227.

mother who lived in poverty. In "Thang an cap"⁸² (The thief) a young beggar was violently beaten after he ate a bowl of noodles without paying (because he did not have any money). The story ends with an absurd scene in which the noodle seller demanded that he "return" the stolen goods. In "Cai von de sinh nhai"⁸³ (An investment to make a living) a epileptic man, who, though he could not hold down a job because of his frequent seizures, was also unable to make a living begging since he did not have any apparent physical disabilities. Having to choose between starving and maiming himself, he jumped from a tree and crippled himself in order to beg for a living. Hoan's novel, *Nhung canh khon nan*⁸⁴ (Scenes of wretchedness) is about an immoral clerk and a corrupt society which allowed him not only to get away with his treachery, but to prosper. *Cai thu lon*⁸⁵ (The pig's head), a novel banned by the French authority, is about village political life, which was filled with corruption, bribery, and costly, meaningless rituals and customs.

The difference between Nguyen Cong Hoan and the Self-Reliance writers in their respective portrayal of the poor is stark. Hoan's representation of poverty is less romantic than those found in the writings of the Self-Reliance group. Hoan relied heavily on sarcasm, irony, and humour perhaps to make his story more entertaining, and perhaps to elude censorship. However entertaining these stories might be, they convey a clear message about the social deterioration of Vietnamese society, and particularly the deterioration of the Confucian moral

⁸² *Ibid.*, written in 1932, pp. 184-191.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, written in 1933, pp. 289-294.

⁸⁴ *Nhung canh khon nan*, volume I. Hanoi: Hoi nha van, 1997. First published in 1932 by Duong Xuan thu quan.

order as a result of the impacts of colonialism and capitalism. Therefore, like the Self-Reliance writers, Hoan was calling for a return to Confucian ethical and moral values and behaviour.

The social realism of Nguyen Hong's fiction also conveys a similar message of moral and spiritual degeneration. Nguyen Hong, the pen name of Nguyen Nguyen Hong, was born of a petty bourgeois family in Nam Dinh in 1918.⁸⁶ His father died when Hong was a young boy, leaving Hong and his family in poverty. Hong left school early, and spent most of his youth unemployed and getting into trouble. As a consequence he was jailed several times in his youth. Despite his troubled past, Hong began a literary career at an early age. At nineteen he produced his first novel, *Bi vo* (The down and out), which won the Self-Reliance award for the best "reportage novel" in 1937. In 1938 Hong's autobiographical work, *Nhung ngay tho au* (Days of childhood), which was inspired by the autobiographical writings of Maxim Gorky and Charles Dickens,⁸⁷ was serialized in the Self-Reliance Group's journal *Ngay Nay*. In 1937 Hong became involved in left-wing political activities, and in 1945 he joined the Viet Minh.⁸⁸

In the introduction to *Bi vo*, Hong related that at sixteen, when he was released from prison, he and his mother moved to Hai Phong where they lived a

⁸⁵ *Cai thu lon*. Hai Phong: Hai Phong Publishing House, 1989. First published by Doi Moi, Hanoi, in 1939.

⁸⁶ Lockhart and Lockhart, *The Light of the Capital*, pp. 157-8.

⁸⁷ See Lockhart, Introduction to the *The Light of the Capital* for a discussion on the importance of Hong's autobiography in Vietnamese history and literature.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

life of utter deprivation.⁸⁹ His mother sold betel leaves and areca nuts, which often provided them with just one meal a day. The misery he and his mother endured and the poverty of his surroundings inspired him to write. Through family help they were finally able to do a little better. Thus when Hong was not constantly hungry, and was able to afford paper and pen, he set about writing the stories that he had been nursing for a long time. His motivation was the desire to accomplish something worthwhile as a dedication to his gentle and loving mother, who had suffered so much in her life.⁹⁰

This devotion to his mother is evident in his sympathetic portrayal of poor women in *Bi vo* and in his other works. His admirable female characters are similar to those in the Self-Reliance stories discussed earlier, women whose endurance, moral strength, and willingness to sacrifice themselves render them models of the idealized Vietnamese woman, and symbols of the Vietnamese nation. Hong's fiction, however, seems more realistic: his characters live a less romantic poverty than those of the Self-Reliance stories. Like Nguyen Cong Hoan, Hong spared his readers little of the seediness, brutality, and cruelty of the living conditions of the poor, both in the city and in the countryside. In his novel, *Bi vo* and short-story collection *Bay Huu*, his protagonists are mostly thieves, gang members, prostitutes, smugglers, and murderers. They use slang and are coarse, unlike the polite characters in the stories of the Self-Reliance writers. Despite being criminals, the characters in Hong's stories elicit sympathy and admiration because the reader is shown how society is responsible for making

⁸⁹ Nguyen Hong, "Toi viet 'Bi vo'" [I write 'Bi vo'], *Bi vo*, Hanoi: Van Hoc, 1996 (First published in 1937, by Doi Nay, Hanoi), pp. 7-11.

them what they are, and, in the face of all suffering, these characters still exhibit moral courage, perseverance, love, and loyalty. Like Nguyen Cong Hoan's depiction, Hong's colonial reality is bleak, with poverty and a collapsing moral order making it a world ruled by deceit and greed. In Hong's works, however, there is hope: hope found in love and loyalty that could be found in even Hong's hardened criminal characters.

Bi vo is a novel about Binh, a young, innocent peasant girl whose life unfolded tragically, in a similar fashion to that of Kieu, the heroine of the famous *The Story of Kieu*.⁹¹ Binh's tragic story began when her lover, who had impregnated her, abandoned her. When Binh's son was born, her parents sold him against her wishes. Out of shame and wanting to spare her parents ridicule from the village, Binh left for the big city, Hai Phong, where she encountered more deceit and cruelty. Binh found herself working in a brothel, then becoming the wife of a notorious thief, Nam Sai Gon, who loved her deeply.⁹² All the while Binh nursed a dream of being able to buy her son back and returning to her village to take care of her younger siblings and aging parents. Like Kieu, the female protagonist in Nguyen Du's story, Binh, despite her life of prostitution and crime, still remained pure and good: she was steadfast in her loyalty to her criminal husband and filial to parents who showed her no love or kindness.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ In this nineteenth-century verse narrative written by Nguyen Du, the victim/heroine Kieu, a righteous and loyal woman, was thrown into an immoral world where she encountered deceit, betrayal and cruelty. She was first separated from her true love, sold to a brothel, made a concubine, and then a wife of a bandit. Through it all, however, Kieu remained pure and loyal.

⁹² Nam Sai Gon literary means "Five Saigon", a nickname given to him since he came from Saigon. In Nguyen Hong's stories about gangs and thieves, everyone went by a nickname, usually led by a number. Binh, for instance, became Tam Binh (Binh Number Eight) since she was the eighth woman to start work at the brothel.

The portrayal of steadfast loyalty and enduring love in the face of absolute deprivation and hopelessness appears in Hong's other stories found in the short-story collection, *Bay Huu*.⁹³ The leading story of this collection, "Bay Huu" (Seven Huu) is about a young female gang member, Bay Huu, who exhibited courage and loyalty even in mortal danger. In "Trong canh khon cung" (In a Scene of utter misery), a dissatisfied ferry owner, after witnessing the strong love between an impoverished couple, felt ashamed of her resentment for her paralyzed husband and of her desire to have an affair. The story "Chin Huyen" (Nine Huyen) is about a widow, Chin Huyen, who, despite failing health, risked her life in order to rescue an old friend and partner in crime. Chin Huyen had left the criminal world after her husband's death and was struggling to raise her children by herself in an honest way. Her decision to help free an old friend who had been captured by the local authority plunged her back into a life of crime. The reader, however, realizes that because of her illness, Chin Huyen and her children would have been doomed either way. In the criminal world, however, Chin Huyen at least had trusted allies. "Day, bong toi" (Here, darkness) is a love story between Mun and Nhan. It is not a typical love story about passion, but a story of enduring love between two poor people and their five children. Mun and Nhan remained faithful and loving to each other even as they became more impoverished. At the end, with the blindness of Nhan (the husband) and death of his wife, the family was reduced to begging simply to survive.

⁹³ Nguyen Hong. *Bay Huu: Truyen hay tien chien* [Bay Huu: Prewar great stories]. Glendale: Dai Nam, n.d.

As in the fiction of Nguyen Cong Hoan, the social realism of Nguyen Hong is bold in its portrayal of the harsh life of the poor. In Hong's depiction ethical or moral principles no longer guided people's behaviour. In both the urban and rural areas corruption and injustices dominated, providing little opportunity for people to improve their lives, except through crimes. In contrast to the fiction of Nguyen Cong Hoan, however, Nguyen Hong's stories exhibit a hope that is embodied by many of his female characters, who remained loyal and morally strong in their relationships and conduct.

Although Hong resembles the Self-Reliance writers in his gentle and compassionate portrayal of people (particularly women) living in poverty, the poor people in his stories were not passive and indifferent, as they were depicted in the Self-Reliance stories. In Hong's stories people made conscious choices. In *Bi vo*, Binh chose to break Nam Sai Gon out of jail, and thereby returned to their relationship even when she could have had a leisurely life as a police detective's mistress. She chose Nam because he was the only person who really loved her. The poor in Hong's stories were aware of their living conditions and strove to improve their lives. Unlike Thach Lam's market girl, Tam, who bowed her head and accepted her life's miserable fate, Hong's characters took action. Chin Huyen, for example, was poised to kill an authority figure to save her friend, while Mun's resourcefulness and energy enabled her to feed her blind husband and five children. These were not passive victims.

Thus, as readers find a sense of outrage in Nguyen Cong Hoan's work, they find a sense of compassion for the poor in Nguyen Hong's. Both authors

conveyed a similar message: there was spiritual and moral degeneration in Vietnamese society under French colonialism. At the heart of this social corruption was material poverty, which pushed people into immorality and criminality. Their fiction highlights the hollowness of the French rhetoric of a 'civilizing' mission. This theme is also found in Tam Lang's documentary report about the lives of rickshaw men, *Toi keo xe* (I pull a rickshaw). In Tam Lang's work, however, the emphasis is on how inhumane treatment of the poor makes them into a class of "*cu li*" (coolie) with no morality.

Documentary or reportage writing became popular during the middle to late 1930s. Following European examples, such as that of French journalist Maryse Choisy who did investigative reporting in brothels, middle-class Vietnamese journalists disguised themselves as rickshaw men and servants to write about the poor.⁹⁴ Lockhart attributes the development of reportage writing which focuses on the 'underclass' of society to the "democratic transformation in the political, social, and literary consciousness during the colonial era"⁹⁵ and to the destruction of "the ancient sense of hierarchy and communal order".⁹⁶ Lockhart argues that Tam Lang's use of the active first person voice in *Toi keo xe* is subversive on two levels. It is subversive in a class sense, providing a perspective from the 'bottom' up; but it is also subversive in suggesting the emergence of a new sense of society and national identity.⁹⁷ When one examines Tam Lang's representation of the poor and his use of gendered

⁹⁴ Lockhart, Introduction to *The Light of the Capital*, p. 17.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-13.

imagery, however, it becomes clear that *Toi keo xe* is a denunciation not only of the exploitation of the urban poor, but also of the destruction of a moral order on a national scale. This destroyed moral order is a Confucian one in which ethical principles guided people's behaviours. Therefore, while Tam Lang might have been using a Western medium (first person documentary reporting) and challenging the social hierarchy, he was also mourning the loss of the 'old' Confucian morality.

Tam Lang (Whose real name is Vu Dinh Chi) was born in 1900 of a middle-class background.⁹⁸ He was educated in the Franco-Vietnamese school system, and began a career in journalism in the 1920s. By the 1930s Tam Lang began writing satirical pieces attacking social injustices. *Toi keo xe* was serialized in 1932, and published as book in 1935. Tam Lang also wrote *Dem Song Huong* (Night on the Perfume River), a reportage piece about prostitution in Hue, published in 1938.⁹⁹ In 1946 he joined the Viet Minh, but, disillusioned, he moved back into the French zone and in 1954 left with the mass anti-communist migration to South Vietnam.¹⁰⁰

To write *Toi keo xe*,¹⁰¹ Tam Lang supposedly disguised himself as a 'coolie' to work as a rickshaw man. According to Vu Ngoc Phan, this was the first documentary work of its kind in Vietnam, and Tam Lang's revelations caused a stir among contemporary readers, who thought the writer had made it all up.¹⁰² Tam Lang's work presents a vivid example of how people from the middle class

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

⁹⁹ Vu Ngoc Phan, *Nha van hien dai*, vol. III, p. 564.

¹⁰⁰ Lockhart, *The Light of the Capital*, p. 52.

could become impoverished, and even farther, become 'coolies'--a term for unskilled labourers that carried derogatory connotations. His reporting makes clear that there were two kinds of poverty: the "natural" kind that seemed tolerable, and the second kind of poverty in which the poor were stripped of dignity and humanity. In pre-modern and modern Europe similar distinctions had been made between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor; between the honest hard working poor and the dangerous vagabond. But in Tam Lang's documentary, the reader can explore this difference from the point of view of the 'coolie' himself. From this perspective, one sees that the injustices and inhumanity that 'coolies' faced daily harden them, rendering them dangerous and 'undeserving'.

Tam Lang documented the life of Tu, a Confucian scholar, turned poor, turned rickshaw man, turned 'coolie', subsequently becoming an opium addict and pimp. When Tu and his family first lost their fortune, he began pulling his own rickshaw in his hometown, but at that time, although poor, he was not despised. However, due to an injustice, the French authorities imprisoned Tu and confiscated his house and rickshaw. After being released from prison, Tu had to go Hanoi to become one of the "horse people", a term commonly used at that time to refer to rickshaw men. Working for cruel and greedy employers and constantly having to deal with customers who try to cheat him, Tu became a 'coolie'. Tam Lang quoted Tu:

Eating with dogs, one has to put one's head down
with them. Although I'd pulled a rickshaw for seven

¹⁰¹ Tam Lang, "I Pulled a Rickshaw", Greg Lockhart and Monique Lockhart, trans., *The Light of the Capital*, pp. 51-120.

¹⁰² Vu Ngoc Phan, *Nha van hien dai*, vol. III, pp. 561-564.

years, it was only from the day I was beaten that I completely became a coolie.¹⁰³

As a 'coolie', Tu shamelessly partook in immoral and criminal activities, declaring that he now worshiped only money. It is clear, however, that he was unable to accept this way of life, as he used all his money for opium which he used to escape his reality. Tu's life symbolizes the disintegration of the pre-colonial Confucian ethical order, which was not replaced by an equivalent order in the colonial capitalist society.

Tu, the former Confucian scholar, was demoralized by the meanness in his society, and by opium--which was known, according to Tam Lang, by its slang name: Miss *Phu Dung*, or the Opium Lady.¹⁰⁴ The dictionary meaning of "*phu dung*" is hibiscus. Two of the dictionaries contain the phrase: "*a phu dung*", with "*a*" meaning gal or damsel, and the entire phrase defined as "opium".¹⁰⁵ Another dictionary states that "*phu dung*" is an old literary term for a beautiful woman.¹⁰⁶ It is unclear when this term came about, and how extensively it was used. It is not a coincidence that the users of this drug, which was personified as a beautiful woman, were mostly men. Those impoverished addicts who did not have ten cents to buy real opium, went to see the "Black Queen". At the Black Queen's place, for five cents an addict could get a bowl of black water that was made from water boiled with old rags used to clean opium lamps and pipes,

¹⁰³ Tam Lang, "I Pulled a Rickshaw", Greg Lockhart and Monique Lockhart, trans., *The Light of the Capital*, p. 97.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁰⁵ Nguyen Van Khon, *Viet-Anh tu dien*. Saigon: Khai Tri, 1966; Bui Phung, *Tu dien Viet-Anh*. Hanoi: The Gioi, 1997.

¹⁰⁶ Van Tan, *Tu dien tieng Viet*. Hanoi: Khoa hoc xa hoi, 1994.

broken opium implements, and opium residue.¹⁰⁷ Gendered images abound: feminine opium, an agent of social corruption, destroys the masculine social-moral order, personified by Tu, the former Confucian scholar.

Like the writings of Nguyen Cong Hoan and Nguyen Hong, Tam Lang's *Toi keo xe* attempts to provide a realistic portrayal of the life of the poor. Focusing on telling the stories of beggars, rickshaw men, prostitutes, and thieves, these social-realist writers were articulating the contradictions in colonial society: the stark contrasts between rich and poor, humanity and cruelty, and between the promises of modernity and the 'backwardness' of reality. The social realist writers aimed to arouse awareness, sympathy and understanding for the poor. They also emphasized the destruction of the Confucian moral order (symbolized by masculine images), and the lack of any replacement to guide people's behaviour. Thus while these writers were borrowing Western literary genres of the short story and documentary writing and challenging the traditional social hierarchy in the use of the first person pronoun, they were in the end reinforcing the importance of Confucian social and moral values.

Conclusion

Vietnamese literature on poverty of the 1930s and 1940s was a vehicle for social criticism, and indirectly for anti-colonial expressions. The poverty that occupied both the Self-Reliance group and the social-realist writers was the kind associated with being a 'coolie', where one was not only lacking money, but

¹⁰⁷ Tam Lang, "I Pulled a Rickshaw", Greg Lockhart and Monique Lockhart, trans., *The Light of the Capital*, pp. 108-112.

dignity. Like the politically conservative journalists examined in Chapter Five, the writers of the 1930s and 1940s did not make a distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, a distinction that was important in the dominant discourse on poverty in Early Modern Western Europe. Poor people portrayed in early twentieth-century Vietnamese fiction were hard working and morally upright. It was their poverty that led to their moral, spiritual and cultural deprivation, and not the other way around. Drug and alcohol addiction, prostitution, and crime played a large part in this degenerative process. The society at large also contributed to the poor's destitution by allowing greed and money to rule. This type of poverty was portrayed as new, as a recent development accompanying the collapse of the pre-colonial moral order and the rise of the capitalist system brought in by colonialism.

By using gendered imagery--a feminine nation and a masculine Confucian moral order--writers were able to connect the humiliation and misery of the poor to a larger problem: the loss of their nation. The contrast between the grim poverty portrayed by the fiction writers and the colonial promises of modernity and progress is jarring. The Self-Reliance and social-realist writers examined here, however, went only so far as to arouse readers' awareness and indignation. With the exception of some of Nguyen Cong Hoan's later works, which were banned, the literature examined here did not call for rebellion. These were not works advocating class warfare or even anti-colonial uprising. This descriptive as opposed to prescriptive approach no doubt reflects the tight colonial censorship. It also reflects the development of the abilities of this first generation

of Western-educated intellectuals to grapple with the globalization forces brought on by colonialism and capitalism. In their attempts to articulate and formulate poverty as a problem in the larger social and national realms, the prose writers were coming to terms with their hybrid cultural makeup, and their material and cultural privileges. Despite their Westernized background, the writers' critique of colonial poverty was rooted in Confucian values and morality. Even the iconoclastic Self-Reliance writers, who openly denounced Confucianism as backward, were reinforcing the idealized feminine qualities of loyalty and perseverance, and were calling for the elite to take up their responsibility for poor relief.

By the late 1930s, more overtly anti-colonial writings appeared. The works of such writers as Ngo Tat To, and of communist party leaders such as Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap on rural poverty (see Chapter Seven), clarify the subtle critiques in the literature of the early and mid-1930s. Moreover, the writings of the late 1930s were more prescriptive, providing solutions to the problem of poverty. Thus while French colonialism fostered the conditions for the emergence of modern Vietnamese literature, this new prose fiction and reportage writing became an important means for Vietnamese intellectuals to voice their concerns about the moral-social degeneration of their country. Poverty was the locus in which material, moral and spiritual deprivation could be explored, and a subject that writers could use to articulate their anguish about the fate of their nation.

Chapter 7: Challenges and Responses to the Problem of Poverty During the Popular Front Period (1936-1939)

The hopes and aspirations of Vietnamese nationalists soared in 1936 when the Popular Front, a coalition dominated by the French Socialist Party, formed the government in France. In Indochina there was support from "most sectors of opinion".¹ Even the Indochinese Communist Party gave the Popular Front its "tentative" approval.² This chapter examines the discourse on poverty during the Popular Front period (1936-1939). The first half of this chapter continues the narration of the Northern Vietnamese intellectuals' articulation and "problematization" of poverty as a social and national issue, an endeavour that began in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The focus here will be on the books published by members of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and its sympathizers since, for the first and only time under French colonialism, communists and socialists were able to operate freely and legally. Thus during 1936 to 1939 there was a flurry of works that directly and boldly criticized French colonial rule, and its legacy of poverty and oppression. At this time, the ICP began shifting its focus from urban to rural poverty. This shift was marked by the publication of Truong Chinh's and Vo Nguyen Giap's *Van de dan cay* (The Peasant Question), and literature examining the plights of the peasants, such as Ngo Tat To's *Tat den* (Lights out) and Nguyen Cong Hoan's *Buoc duong cung*

¹William Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976, p. 240.

² *Ibid.*

(Dead end). From the ICP's analysis, poverty was a problem connected with class exploitation and colonialism. Their writing explicitly challenged the French claim of bringing material and moral progress to Indochina.

The second part of this chapter will examine how the colonial government during the Popular Front period dealt with the rising challenge to their rule, and the increasing critique of colonial impoverishment. In the early 1930s, French socialists, such as Marius Moutet, who later became the Front's Minister of Colonies, had advocated "*décolonisation progressive*".³ As the government, however, the socialists "no longer spoke of relinquishing French political rule".⁴ Moutet's and the Popular Front's concerns were focused on improving the social conditions of the colonies, in order that the French hold over Indochina would be strengthened, and not for the purpose of eventual decolonization as Vietnamese nationalists had hoped.⁵ The French colonial administration's effort to improve the livelihood of the ordinary Indochinese, therefore, was motivated by the perceived threat of losing control of the colony to nationalist and communist insurgency. Upon forming the government, the Popular Front set up inquiry commissions and sent out an emissary to the colonies to investigate the living conditions of the natives. These inquiries revealed the lack of sincere commitment on the colonial government's part to make significant reforms. While the colonial administrators and the ICP writers differed sharply in their analyses of poverty in Indochina, both groups of writers shared a paternalistic attitude toward the poor, and vied for moral authority over them.

³ Daniel Hémery, "Aux origines des guerres d'indépendance vietnamiennes: pouvoir colonial et phénomène communiste en Indochine avant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale", *Mouvement Social*, 101 (1977), p. 8.

⁴ Nguyen The Anh, "The Vietnamese Monarchy under French Colonial Rule, 1884-1945", *Modern Asian Studies*, 19, 1 (1985), pp. 159-160.

⁵ *Ibid.*

The Indochinese Communist Party and the Poor

The Vietnamese communist party had its beginning in 1925 with the creation of the *Viet Nam thanh nien kach menh hoi* (The Vietnamese revolutionary youth association). Ho Chi Minh was instrumental in founding this Youth Association, which was dissolved in 1929 when the *Dong Duong cong san dang* (The Indochinese Communist Party--ICP) was formed.⁶ In the early 1930s under Moscow's influence, Vietnamese communists were preoccupied with the need for "proletarianization of the party" while scant attention was given to the peasants.⁷ In the 1920s and 1930s Ho Chi Minh, in contrast to Mao Zedong, "publicly conceded very little to the peasants, except the fact that they were brutally and unjustly oppressed."⁸ In 1929 Ho Chi Minh indicated in an article on Chinese peasants that the revolutionary potential of the peasants could only be realized after an "intensive campaign of education" by the Chinese communist leaders.⁹

The emergence of revolutionary writings on the Vietnamese peasants in the late 1930s, therefore, marked a turning point in the Vietnamese communists' urban orientation. The political treatise and prose fiction concerning the Vietnamese peasants highlighted not only the peasants' oppression, which many Vietnamese anti-colonialist intellectuals by the late 1930s had already accepted as fact, but their revolutionary potential. Despite this new attention on the peasants, the communist writers were not fully endorsing the peasants as revolutionaries. Like Ho Chi Minh of the 1920s, the writers examined below were of the opinion that elite leadership was needed to educate and guide the peasants in their resistance.

Ho Chi Minh's elitist view regarding the peasants was also seen in the journalistic writings in collaborating newspapers and in the prose fiction of liberal intellectuals such

⁶ Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism 1925-1945*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 58.

⁷ Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, p. 236.

⁸ Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976, p. 170.

⁹ *Ibid.*

as the Self-Reliance members. Thus the ICP shared with the other Vietnamese nationalists a paternalistic attitude--not unlike the Confucian paternalism of the Vietnamese monarchs--toward the poor. This chapter will show that the ICP shared another common view with nineteenth-century Vietnamese monarchs: the analysis that land was central to rural poverty. Thus while the ICP's and its sympathizers' writings on poverty were coached in the new language of class struggle, some of their attitudes and approaches were decidedly 'traditional' and Confucian.

Nguyen Khac Vien, the leading spokesperson for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam during the American-Vietnamese war years, suggests that Confucianism and Marxism had enough in common such that Marxism was more palatable to the Vietnamese society than other Western political philosophies, such as liberalism:

Marxism was not baffling to Confucians in that it concentrated man's thoughts on political and social problems. By defining man as the total of his social relationships, Marxism hardly came as a shock to the Confucian scholar who had always considered the highest aim of man to be the fulfillment of his social obligations.¹⁰

According to Vien, there were "two streams of Confucian thought": one that was associated with the monarch and his mandarin bureaucracy, and the other that was upheld by village scholars.¹¹ The latter, being unable to pass exams to become mandarins, lived humbly among the people, some acting as village teachers or scribes. During times of trouble it tended to be the village scholars who would lead rebellions, in the name of restoring the proper Confucian order. Vien suggests further that mid-twentieth century communist cadres were modern versions of the Confucian village scholars. The ICP's discourse on poverty supports Vien's suggestion that Marxism's emphasis on social responsibility and moral behaviour made it readily acceptable to a

¹⁰ Nguyen Khac Vien, "Confucianism and Marxism", in David Marr and Jayne Werner, eds., *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*. Berkeley: The Indochina Resource Center, 1974, p. 47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Confucian society. Like the politically conservative journalists and liberal novelists of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the ICP was providing a hybridized solution to the modern problem of poverty. The ICP, however, was also able to provide a strong political organization that could promise the eradication of poverty.

The Peasant Question

Van de dan cay (The peasant question), written by the ICP's educated members, Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, can be seen as the ICP's official statement on, and analysis of, the problems of poverty and oppression in the Vietnamese countryside. Truong Chinh joined the Marxist Youth Association in 1927, and had been a member of the ICP since its formation in 1930.¹² Truong Chinh, whose name translates as Long March, was the alias for Dang Xuan Khu. In 1930 Truong Chinh was imprisoned for his political activities and was released in 1936 when the Popular Front gave amnesty to political prisoners.¹³ As the theoretician for the ICP, Truong Chinh authored a number of works on national liberation and revolution. From 1941 to 1956 Truong Chinh was the Party's secretary general, and presided over the land reform program instituted in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1954. The land reform program redistributed 810,000 hectares of land to 2,104,000 poor peasant families.¹⁴ The violence and chaos connected with the program, however, led to Truong Chinh's removal from the powerful position of secretary general.¹⁵

Vo Nguyen Giap, famous for his leading role in the 1954 victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu, became active in anticolonial activities during the

¹² Christine Pelzer White, "Introduction" for Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Peasant Question* (1937-1938). Translated by Christine White. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1974, p. viii.

¹³ Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism*, p. 257, footnote 55.

¹⁴ Woodside, *Community and Revolution*, p. 251.

¹⁵ Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism*, p. 257, footnote 55.

student protest movement of 1926. He joined the ICP in the early 1930s and was subsequently jailed.¹⁶ During his probation period in 1931, Giap worked as a research assistant for Pierre Gourou, whose pioneering rural sociological and geographical studies of Vietnam are still being consulted. Giap conducted research on housing styles in Central Vietnam for one of Gourou's books.¹⁷ As John Kleinen suggests, this experience probably contributed significantly to the production of *The Peasant Question*.¹⁸

Since both Truong Chinh and Giap went on to attain prominence and powerful positions within the party and in the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, *The Peasant Question* provided important insights into the ICP's view of rural poverty. According to Christine White who wrote the introduction and translated *The Peasant Question* into English, this work "was the first detailed study of concrete peasant conditions in Vietnam by leading members of the Indochinese Communist Party, and thus provided a base for the elaboration of later Communist peasant policies."¹⁹ Kleinen writes that *The Peasant Question* "would serve as a manifesto for radical reform of the political and economic life of Vietnam's peasantry."²⁰

The Peasant Question was an attempt to inform the urban readers of the problems of the countryside, such as heavy taxes, high rent, usury, lack of land, and general precariousness of life for the majority of people in the villages. It was also an attempt to convince other Marxists that the peasants were indeed

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 259, footnote 60.

¹⁷ According to John Kleinen, Giap's research was included, unacknowledged because of his status as a "political detainee set free on probation", in Gourou's *Esquisse d'une étude de l'habitation annamite dans l'Annam septentrional et central du Thanh Hoa au Binh Dinh*. John Kleinen, "The Village as Pretext. Ethnographic Praxis and the Colonial State in Vietnam", in Jan Breman *et al.*, eds., *The Village in Asia Revisited*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 369-370.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Christine Pelzer White, "Introduction" for Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Peasant Question* (1937-1938), p. ix.

²⁰ Kleinen, "Village as Pretext", p. 370.

the "proletariat in the countryside" and hence to show that the sufferings of poor peasants could be harnessed for the revolution.²¹ Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap went at length to explain that in class terms, "the peasants [were] members of the rural petty-bourgeoisie", and not members of the proletariat. However, the "proletarianization" of the countryside, which caused an increase in the number of landless and poor peasants, made it possible to see poor peasants as comparable to workers. The writers argued that in political tendencies rich peasants were the equivalent of the Marxist bourgeois class, and poor and landless peasants the equivalent of proletarians. Despite having a superstitious, feudal, and individualistic mentality, peasants, according to Truong Chinh and Giap, were an "invincible force" and "necessary for any movement to be successful".²² In this convoluted reasoning it seemed that Truong Chinh and Giap were in part trying to convince themselves of the peasants' revolutionary capacity.

Another reason prompting Truong Chinh and Giap to produce this work was their apparent frustration with the Popular Front's lack of action in instituting change or in helping alleviate poverty. In their introduction Truong Chinh and Giap charged that while the Popular Front made improvements for French peasants, "our peasants have received nothing."²³ The authors noted that even though Jules Brévié, when he first became Governor General of Indochina in September 1936, stated, "First we must see to it that the people have food", Brévié's peasant policy missed the mark.²⁴ According to Truong Chinh and Giap, Brévié's policy emphasized:

irrigation, migration, agricultural cooperatives, low interest loans, etc. However, there is no mention of

²¹ Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Peasant Question*, p. 17.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 19-22.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the principal causes of the peasants' poverty and degeneration: landlord rent oppression, the seizure of peasant land, and heavy taxes.²⁵

In order to correct the colonial government's lack of insight, Truong Chinh's and Giap's book focused on the "principal causes" of poverty: high rent, usury, and heavy taxes, termed the "three yokes" that burdened the peasants and made it impossible for them to maintain a secure livelihood. Thus like the Nguyen monarchs of the nineteenth century, Truong Chinh and Giap viewed that the main cause of poverty was the poor peasants' lack of access to basic resources, such as land. According to them, high rent, usury, and heavy taxes made peasants vulnerable and could lead them to lose whatever little land they might have possessed. Under the section of "Rent Exploitation", the authors explained that not only was rent unfairly high, the tenants had many burdensome obligations toward the landlords, such as giving gifts, and providing their labour for special occasions. According to Truong Chinh and Giap, the landlords were like parasitic tapeworms, whose "'wealth and honors' [were] nothing but mushrooms springing up on the dung pile of exploitation!"²⁶ The "second yoke" was usury, which usually caused peasants to lose their lands, and thus further destroyed a poor household's ability to get out of poverty. Despite laws limiting the amount of interest that could be charged on a loan, in practice peasants usually ended up paying fifty-percent interest. In addition, lenders sometimes manipulated contracts and tricked peasants into paying more or relinquishing their land holdings. Money lending, according to *The Peasant Question*, was one quick and easy way for businessmen in the cities to become large landlords. Heavy taxes were the "third yoke". Although both types of taxes--head and rice field taxes--were heavy and unfair, the head tax was more burdensome for the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

poor. Because even the poorest landless labourer must pay the same head tax as a wealthy landlord, tax-collection time usually meant trouble for the destitute who must borrow at usurious rates or pawn all their belongings including their children to pay their taxes.

Volume Two of the book examined the negative impacts of the Colonial government's monopolies on alcohol, salt, and opium, which acted like another type of tax on the people. This section also focused on the land problem caused by the accumulation of land by French and Vietnamese officials and capitalists, leaving little land for a common peasant. Moreover, the system of communal land, which still existed in some areas, particularly in Northern Vietnam, was eroding, often used by village notables for their own profits. Lastly, Truong Chinh and Giap examined the living conditions of the peasants and faulted the government for its lack of attention to improving rural infrastructure, public sanitation, and education.

The Peasant Question confirmed what must have already become common knowledge by the late 1930s--that life for poor peasants and labourers was difficult. Journalistic and fictional works of the mid-1920s and early 1930s already painted rural life as filled with poverty, misery, ignorance, and ill-health (see Chapter Six). Truong Chinh and Giap's book described the various levels of poverty: every year agricultural labourers went hungry for seven to eight months, poor peasants went hungry for five to six months while middle peasants, three to four months.²⁷ During this time the poor usually subsisted on one meal of rice gruel, corn or potatoes a day. This description of rural poverty probably paled in comparison to the heart-rending images/stories to which urban readers had been exposed through the writings of the Self-Reliance group, the social realist writers, or the documentaries on "coolies" and prostitutes (see Chapter

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Six). The book's value was not the sensational attention it brought to the plight of peasants, but the attempt at analyzing systematically the causes of poverty. According to Truong Chinh and Giap, the problem of landlessness and the difficulty of securing a livelihood were at the heart of the problem for the Vietnamese peasants. Truong Chinh's and Vo Nguyen Giap's book represented perhaps the first legally published non-fictional indictment against French colonialism and the rich landlords in impoverishing the Vietnamese countryside. Apparently the Brévié government did not appreciate Truong Chinh's and Giap's analysis of colonial poverty and exploitation, for shortly after the second volume was published it was confiscated and banned.²⁸

Although the authors of *The Peasant Question* made absolutely clear that the causes of rural poverty were exploitation by landlords, capitalists, and French colonialism, they also suggested that the peasants contributed to the problem themselves. According the authors, peasants were backward, superstitious and deeply influenced by "feudal thoughts".²⁹ Thus peasants accepted their lowly position vis-à-vis landlords and mandarins, acting obsequiously when in their presence. Moreover, Truong Chinh and Giap continued, peasants had the "mentality of private ownership", and thus were suspicious of collective work. This attitude was clearly seen in their mutual-help organizations, which:

are all characterized by individual profit for each member of the group. None have a social nature, i.e., a common advantage for the entire group or for society, in which the individual also gains.³⁰

This pessimistic evaluation of the revolutionary potential of the peasants by a self-claimed Maoist (Truong Chinh) suggests that the ICP probably did not

²⁸ Minh-Tranh, "Introduction to the 1959 Edition", *The Peasant Question*, p. 1.

²⁹ Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Peasant Question*, p. 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

regard the notion of a peasant-led communist revolution tenable even in the late 1930s. This criticism echoed those opinions voiced in politically conservative newspapers and journals such as *Trung Bac tan van*, *Bao Dong Phap*, and *Nam phong* (see Chapter Five); opinions that railed against Vietnamese people for not being more social and national in their outlook. Espousing similar views as writers for the above-mentioned papers, Truong Chinh and Giap asserted that peasants were limited by their own ignorance and "irrational" social customs from improving their productivity and to accumulate wealth.³¹ Peasants were, after all, according to Truong Chinh and Giap, "simple-minded" and "[did] not understand the cause of their misery".³² Thus, embedded in the ICP's first systematic statement on the revolutionary potential of the Vietnamese peasants was the Confucian elitist attitude toward the poor. Although the ICP was on the opposite ends on the political spectrum from elite intellectuals such as Pham Quynh and the Self-Reliance members, they all shared the view that poor peasants needed guidance to escape poverty. The ICP writers were also proposing that they, like the Confucian village scholars, would be the appropriate leaders for such an endeavour.

Buoc duong cung

According to the official Vietnamese Communist Party line, Nguyen Cong Hoan's *Buoc duong cung* and Ngo Tat To's *Tat den* were pioneering and outstanding works of proto-revolutionary literature. In 1963, an article in a Hanoi literary journal, *Tap chi van hoc*, noted that the novels *Buoc duong cung* and *Tat den* were the first literary endeavours to deal with issues of rural poverty and injustice, which were raised by Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap's *The*

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-102.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Peasant Question.³³ In 1973 the Party's daily, *Nhan Dan*, stated that Nguyen Cong Hoan and Ngo Tat To were outstanding critical realist writers, whose works while not truly revolutionary, contributed greatly to the revolution.³⁴

Buoc duong cung reads like a literary version of *The Peasant Question*, in presenting a fictional story around the issues of official corruption, usury, and heavy taxes. As with Hoan's other social-realist works (some of which have been examined in Chapter Six), this novel focused on the poverty, injustice, and humiliation peasants suffered under village and state authorities, and under the rich landlords. There was no indication as to whether or not Hoan was directly influenced by any particular Western or Vietnamese literary work in the creation of *Buoc duong cung*, which he apparently wrote in only sixteen days.³⁵ As previously discussed in Chapter Six, Hoan claimed that he did not read much Western literature and was not influenced by any particular author. Nevertheless, as a contemporary of Hoan suggested, it would have been impossible in the early days of Vietnamese prose fiction development not to have been exposed to Western classics and not to have been influenced by Western literary trends.³⁶

Buoc duong cung is different from Nguyen Cong Hoan's previous works. This novel is dark and humourless, lacking the slap-stick comedy for which Hoan's favourite dramatist Molière was famous. It is apparent that Hoan did not

³³ Nam Moc, "Doc lai *Buoc duong cung* cua Nguyen Cong Hoan" [Rereading *Dead end* of Nguyen Cong Hoan], Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Nguyen Cong Hoan: Cay but hien thuc xuat sac* [Nguyen Cong Hoan: An outstanding realist writer]. Hanoi: Van Hoa Thong Tin, 2000, p. 391. This article was first published in *Tap chi van hoc* [Literature review] 3 (1963).

³⁴ Nhu Phong, "Mot nha van xuat sac cua dong van hoc hien thuc phe phan" [An outstanding writer of critical realist literature], in Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Nguyen Cong Hoan: Cay but hien thuc xuat sac*, p. 17. This article was originally published in *Nhan dan* [The people], 6008, March 25, 1973.

³⁵ No Author, "Nha van Nguyen Cong Hoan nien bieu va tac pham" [The chronicle and work of writer Nguyen Cong Hoan], in Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Nguyen Cong Hoan: Cay but hien thuc xuat sac*, p. 439.

³⁶ Hoang Trung Thong, "Nguyen Cong Hoan nhu toi biet" [Nguyen Cong Hoan as I knew him], in Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Nguyen Cong Hoan: Cay but hien thuc xuat sac*, pp. 148-149.

intend to entertain with *Buoc duong cung*, and in fact, in several parts the novel reads like a political treatise--a lesson about landlord and mandarin exploitation of the common people. As Truong Chinh noted in 1956, with *Buoc duong cung* Nguyen Cong Hoan departed from his previous works by using less satire, a more serious tone, and in showing more comradeship toward the rural poor.³⁷ The change in tone perhaps reflected his increasing left-wing political involvement. In 1928 he joined the *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang*, a liberal nationalist organization led by Nguyen Thai Hoc, but by 1936 Hoan had become involved with the ICP and was considered a "dangerous communist" by the French authorities.³⁸ By 1938 the popularity of the French Socialist Party was on the decline, and in the colonies this translated into a reversion to repression.³⁹ During this period the ICP journals and newspapers were closed, radicals arrested, and political party activities limited.⁴⁰ Hoan's decision not to use satire to soften his scathing condemnation of the status quo resulted in a ban of *Buoc duong cung* throughout Indochina.⁴¹ Before the ban took effect, however, several rave reviews appeared in Vietnamese journals and papers and five thousand copies were sold.⁴² From that point onward, Hoan was put under close scrutiny of the police, and his subsequent works banned.

The plot of *Buoc duong cung* revolved around Mr. and Mrs. Pha of An Dao village.⁴³ The couple and their baby son subsisted modestly by farming their 240 square metres of rice field and from Mrs. Pha's marketing activity. Trouble

³⁷ Truong Chinh, "*Buoc duong cung*: Tieu thuyet cua Nguyen Cong Hoan" [Dead end: The novel of Nguyen Cong Hoan], in Vu Thanh Viet, ed., *Nguyen Cong Hoan: Cay but hien thuc xuat sac*, p. 380. This article is a reprint from *Van nghe* [Arts and letters], 144 (1956).

³⁸ No Author, "Nha van Nguyen Cong Hoan nien bieu va tac pham" [The chronicle and work of writer Nguyen Cong Hoan], pp. 438-439.

³⁹ Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, p. 256.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ No Author, "Nha van Nguyen Cong Hoan nien bieu va tac pham", p. 439.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Nguyen Cong Hoan, *Buoc duong cung*. Ho Chi Minh City: Van Nghe Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1999. Reprint. First published in 1938.

began, however, when Lai, the local Representative (*Nghi vien*)⁴⁴ and wealthy land owner, tricked Pha into filing a law suit against Pha's neighbour (Thi) against whom Pha bore a grudge. Lai offered to lend Pha money to get the suit underway. Unbeknownst to Pha, Lai also provided money to Thi and encouraged him to sue Pha. Lai's purpose was to cause Pha and Thi to be so heavily in debt that they would be unable to repay him, and consequently would have to relinquish their land holdings to him. Sending two naive illiterate peasants to the magistrate was also a way for Lai to repay his associates at the district Magistrate's office, who profited on made-up fees and forced bribes. Through the corruption and exploitation of Lai as well as those of the village and district officials, Pha and his wife were slowly impoverished. Tax collection time and a flood further increased the couple's misery, to the point that they were eating raw banana roots. Eventually Mrs. Pha and her son died of cholera. Pha had to sell his house to Thi, and relinquish his land to Lai because he had no way of repaying his debts. Without land Pha was completely vulnerable, without anything on which to rely except his labour. In the end, with the help of Du, his wife's educated brother, Pha finally understood that he along with other villagers were being exploited by Lai and other officials, and that this injustice should not be tolerated. Pha united with his long-time enemy Thi, and another villager, San, to defend their rights. Although all three men lost land to Lai, they decided that they were entitled to the crop presently in the fields. Emboldened by Du's encouragement, they helped each other harvest their respective fields. Before they had a chance to harvest Pha's field, however, Lai sent for the militia who beat Pha and took him away. Before he was captured, Pha was able to whack

⁴⁴ Lai was the representative for the *Chambre indigènes des représentants du peuple* (formerly the *Chambres consultatives indigènes*), which was created in Tonkin in 1913. Representatives were elected by Canton chiefs, deputy chiefs, and indigenous administrative agents to meet once a year to provide opinions on the Protectorate's budget and present their views. Eugène Teston and Maurice Percheron, *L'Indochine Moderne*. Paris: Librairie de France, 1931, p. 99.

Lai with a pole, an act that had tremendous significance, for it demonstrated that he was no longer afraid of or willing to be subservient to Lai. More importantly, this violent act against a higher ranking village member showed that Pha no longer accepted the traditional hierarchical order. As he was being taken away, Pha thrust his tied arms into the air showing his resolve to continue fighting.

Truong Chinh distinguished *Buoc duong cung* from other realist works (including Hoan's other stories) at that time, in its call for the oppressed to rise up against the landlords and colonialists.⁴⁵ In the novel there was not one single rich person or authority figure, who was not greedy, corrupt, or heartless. The novel's message was quite clear, the peasants must educate themselves (become literate) and learn to work together against injustice. Throughout the story, Pha's inability to read made it easier for Lai and other village officials to take advantage of him. Despite the continued exploitation, Pha did not seem to be convinced until the end of Du's opinion that Lai should be regarded as a common enemy. Slowly Pha and his wife began to understand that it was wrong for Lai to profit off their hard work.

Du, Pha's literate and well-read brother-in-law who educated Pha and other illiterate peasants of their exploitation, is akin to Nguyen Khac Vien's Confucian village scholars, those who tended to become the leaders of rebellions in periods of injustice and hardship. In *Buoc duong cung*, Du tried to organize a petition against the village leaders for corrupt taxation practices.⁴⁶ The village head and the chair of the village council had made people pay more than what the law stipulated and then pocketed the surplus. The attempt to expose the corrupt village leaders fell apart when those supporting the petition were incarcerated until they promised to withdraw their names from the petition.

⁴⁵ Truong Chinh, "*Buoc duong cung*: Tieu thuyet cua Nguyen Cong Hoan", pp. 381-382.

⁴⁶ Nguyen Cong Hoan, *Buoc duong cung*, p. 227-228.

Du, the proto-revolutionary who knew his rights, could not be intimidated or exploited by the village leaders.

In summary, the *Buoc duong cung* served to detail the humiliation and exploitation peasants experience from landlords and from all levels of government (French and Vietnamese). It was also a story about Pha's political education--a process that taught him about his rights and how to protect them. As Pha's older brother, a worker from far away, advised Pha:

Peasants are doomed because of their inability to coordinate with each other, and thus they are ruthlessly oppressed. In truth our two arms are very valuable. They can make others rich and us poor. Therefore, we must unite all those arms for strength, and who wouldn't be afraid of us.⁴⁷

Tat den

Ngo Tat To's novel *Tat den* (Lights out) is considered among one of the most outstanding accomplishments in Vietnamese realist fiction.⁴⁸ *Tat den* was first serialized in a weekly journal *Viet Nu*, in 1937 and was published as a novel in 1939.⁴⁹ *Tat den* was one of the first fiction works to examine in a concerted and wholehearted way the problems of poverty and corruption in the countryside.⁵⁰ Like *Buoc duong cung*, *Tat den* was more explicit than the fiction of the early 1930s (such as those works examined in Chapter Six) in its criticism of oppressive colonial policies and wealthy landlords and officials. In this novel, Ngo Tat To showed that there was nothing redeemable about the rich and ruling class; that there was no choice for the poor but to rebel.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁴⁸ Ho Si Hiep et. al, *Ngo Tat To, Nguyen Huy Tuong, To Hoai*. Ho Chi Minh City: Van Nghe, 1997, p. 17.

⁴⁹ Lu Huy Nguyen, introduction to *Tat den, Tieu thuyet Ngo Tat To* [Fiction of Ngo Tat To], Hanoi: Van Hoc, 1997, p. 218. *Tat den* was published by Mai Linh, Hanoi.

⁵⁰ Nguyen Dang Manh, "Ve tac pham 'Tat den' cua Ngo Tat To" [Regarding the work 'Tat den' of Ngo Tat To], in Ho Si Hiep et. al., *Ngo Tat To, Nguyen Huy Tuong, To Hoai*, p. 43.

Ngo Tat To, a Confucian scholar turned journalist, essayist, and novelist, excelled in Western-style writings and genres. It is unclear if any particular Western writer had a deep influence on Ngo Tat To, providing inspiration for *Tat den*. Vietnamese literary critic Vu Ngoc Phan, however, noted that To's prose fiction seemed to have been heavily influenced by Western writing, to the extent that To's work read like it had been translated from French.⁵¹ Phan pointed to To's excessive use of words such as "bang" (by), "duoc" (to have), and "bi" (to be) to support his criticism of To's writing style.

Ngo Tat To came from a poor background, and two years before the publication of *Tat den*, his home province Bac Ninh was flooded, impoverishing six districts.⁵² He actively helped organize relief to the province, where his family and neighbours were victims of the flood. Perhaps this experience contributed to the highly emotional tone of *Tat den*, particularly the moving exploration of what it feels like to be so destitute that one has to sell one's own beloved daughter, as the protagonist of *Tat den* was forced to do.

Tat den took place during tax collection time in Dong Xa village.⁵³ The main protagonists were Mr. and Mrs. Dau and their three children. The couple worked as farm labourers and hired hands, but were finding it increasingly more difficult to make ends meet as they started having children and as the economy became more depressed. Life was always hard for the Dau family, but this particular tax-collection period was unusually difficult. Recent funeral expenses the family had to incur for the deaths of Mr. Dau's mother and brother, and Mr. Dau's inability to work in the past three months due to sickness, impoverished them. Unable to borrow 2.70 piastres to pay his head tax (only adult males were

⁵¹ Vu Ngoc Phan, *Nha van hien dai*. Vol. III [Modern writers]. Glendale: Dai Nam. n.d. (First published by Tan Dan, Hanoi, in 1942), pp. 614-620.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ The edition I am using is from *Tieu thuyet Ngo Tat To* [The fiction of Ngo Tat To]. Hanoi: Van Hoc, 1997, pp. 217-396.

taxed), Mr. Dau was imprisoned. Even though he was sick with a high fever he received no leniency. Fearing for his life, Mrs. Dau sold their oldest daughter (who was seven) along with their dog and her pups to their local Representative, Mr. Que, and his wife. This wealthy, but greedy couple, taking advantage of Mrs. Dau's desperation, haggled her down to a price of 2.20 piastres for both her daughter and dogs. When Mrs. Dau was finally able to gather enough money to pay for her husband's head tax, she was told by the tax collector that they would have to pay a head tax for Dau's dead brother, since he had died within that tax year.

Throughout the intense heart-rending struggle Mrs. Dau remained strong and virtuous. Because they were short on money to pay their taxes, Mrs. Dau had to sell her own daughter to a mean-spirited family, had to witness her sick husband being brutally treated, while her remaining two children were hungry and missing their elder sister. Nguyen Danh Manh, a specialist on Vietnamese literature, notes that:

[The character of] Mrs. Dau is a continuation of the traditional image of Vietnamese women found in legends and stories in Nom [demotic script] of long ago: A woman with a beautiful soul, who because of bad karma from a previous life, is trampled into the black mud by a cruel society.⁵⁴

Unlike women in traditional Vietnamese stories, such as the Story of Kieu, however, Mrs. Dau did not passively accept her fate. She fearlessly, but politely, tried to reason with local authorities for leniency and compassion. In cases of utter injustice, she took action. In one scene when the tax collectors were about to beat her ill husband, Mrs. Dau fought back and chased them out of her house. In two separate instances she had to wrestle against the prefecture and the provincial mandarins, both of whom had attempted to rape her. In this sense

⁵⁴ Nguyen Dang Manh, "Ve tac pham 'Tat den' cua Ngo Tat To", p. 51.

Mrs. Dau was different from the female characters of the Self-Reliance group, who were depicted as gentle, and beautiful, but passive victims (see Chapter Six). Mrs. Dau resembled the strong female characters in social realist fiction of the early 1930s, particular the characters in Nguyen Hong's stories, who struggled in their poverty but who never lost their self-dignity and virtues.

Unlike the pessimistic view of social and moral disintegration as depicted by other social realist writers, however, Ngo Tat To showed that moral corruption was taking place only among the landlords and officials. Among the poor and common people, moral and ethical principles were still upheld. The poor in *Tat den* were not morally corrupt, nor were they driven to criminal activities and prostitution. When propositioned by a powerful prefecture mandarin, Mrs. Dau threw his money to the floor and tried to run away. Mrs. Dau's husband, although incapacitated by his illness, had been a hard-working and loving husband. Their neighbours were supportive and compassionate. None had been reduced to being like the immoral and self-despising "coolie" of Tam Lang's reportage. In other words, the poor in *Tat den* still upheld Confucian morality and values, while the mandarins and landlord did not.

Tat den's class-conscious analysis of rural poverty implicated the wealthy mandarin class and colonialism, which spawned unfair tax policies, corruption, and injustice. The cause of the Dau family's impoverishment was at first connected to the life cycle (birth of children, sickness) that many families with young children often encountered. But they were still getting by until the tax-collecting period began. The causes of their utter desperation and misery were the unfair tax policy, the corruption among the tax collectors and village officials, and the lack of a fair credit system or social assistance.

In both novels, *Buoc duong cung* and *Tat den*, the People's Representatives (*Nghi vien*) were portrayed as uneducated and greedy landlords

who had gained their prestigious positions through bribes and personal connections. Both Lai and Que and their respective wives shamelessly took advantage of Pha's and Dau's desperate situations. As both Lai and Que were representatives to the Native Chamber of People's Representative created by the colonial government, their utter brutality and ignorance made a mockery of the French ruse of political consultation. Describing Representative Que's "work" in the Chamber of Representatives, Ngo Tat To wrote:

In the Chamber he, like virtually all other representatives, does not discuss and does not need to listen to discussions. But, he also only yawns, and has never nodded off to sleep. This is because he is afraid that someone might steal his Chi Long shoes...⁵⁵

Thus this Chamber of Representatives, one of the few concessions made for native participation in government in Northern Vietnam, is portrayed as a worthless institution, only profitable for those elected and their friends.

In comparing Nguyen Cong Hoan's *Buoc duong cung* to Ngo Tat To's *Tat den*, Truong Chinh opined that the peasants' resistance was fiercer in *Buoc duong cung* than in the latter. Moreover, Truong Chinh believed that although both novels ended with the failure of the peasants to achieve justice, *Buoc duong cung* offered a ray of hope in its message that united, the poor had considerably more strength to fight.⁵⁶

Buoc duong cung also presented a less biased portrait of the poor than *Tat den*. In Hoan's novel, the peasants were partly responsible for their predicament by not learning to read, and by their willingness to obey village customs and village notables. Like the rich landlords and officials, the peasants were also greedy, selfish, and petty. Pha and his wife first got into trouble

⁵⁵ Ngo Tat To, *Tat den*, p. 248.

⁵⁶ Truong Chinh, "*Buoc duong cung: Tieu thuyet cua Nguyen Cong Hoan*", pp. 381-382.

because they wanted to wreak revenge on their neighbour. In another instance in *Buoc duong cung*, the villagers' inability to form a united front made an attempt to petition the higher authority about the village officials' corruption during tax collection fall apart. The peasants in *Tat den*, however, were supportive and sympathetic to each other. Fellow peasants imprisoned at the hall for not being able to pay their taxes, provided moral support to Mrs. Dau when they learned that she had sold her daughter.⁵⁷ Dau's neighbours showed concern when Mr. Dau was returned from the communal hall, fatally ill because of his fever and ill-treatment at the hands of the guards. Many neighbours came to visit, some providing folk remedies, while others brought some much-needed rice for them.⁵⁸ In this sense, *Tat den* presented a more optimistic view of peasant nature--that they were not innately suspicious, individualist, and selfish as *Buoc duong cung* and *The Peasant Question* suggested. Therefore, one can argue that Ngo Tat To's novel was not as pessimistic about peasant resistance as Truong Chinh had argued.

These two fictional accounts of rural poverty complemented neatly Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap's *The Peasant Question*, in providing concrete personal stories of exploitation and corruption. All three publications were strong indictments against rich landlords and mandarins for contributing to the impoverishment of the peasants. They all exposed the negative impacts of heavy taxes, usury, and official corruption. Moreover, all three works reinforced the importance of providing peasants with land and basic resources for a secure livelihood, and they also reinforced the value of Confucian morality and a person's social responsibility. Furthermore, the novels of Nguyen Cong Hoan and Ngo Tat To supported Truong Chinh's and Giap's suggestion that Brévié's

⁵⁷ Ngo Tat To, *Tat den*, p. 307.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

peasant policy had missed the mark in not concentrating on the issues of land and tax, which were essential for maintaining a secure subsistence. They also made the idea of a French "civilizing" mission--an idea that was still being upheld even by the Popular Front politicians--seemed farcical.

Colonial Inquiries into poverty in Indochina

The contrast between the analysis of poverty of the ICP members and that of the French colonial government is stark. While writers like Truong Chinh and Giap emphasized heavy taxes, usury, and lack of land, the French official discourse avoided any mention of tax burdens. This section will show that although the Popular Front government claimed to have been concerned about colonial living conditions, much energy was used to investigate and discuss the problem with virtually no real action or result.

According to Daniel Hémery, during the Popular Front period three main themes recurred in secret correspondences of the Minister of Colonies and in cabinet dossiers: concerns about famines in the colonies, proletarianization of the peasantry, and the growing strength of communism in Indochina.⁵⁹ The Popular Front's three main concerns were intimately connected to the level of poverty in the colonies. Therefore, in both the *Métropole* and the colony the emphasis in the official discourse was on improving the living conditions of the colonized peoples. Jules Brévié stated shortly after resuming his post as the Governor General of Indochina that the administration must "intervene immediately to remedy the present undernourishment of the population of the Tonkinese Delta."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Hémery, "Aux origines des guerres d'indépendance vietnamiennes: pouvoir colonial et phénomène communiste en Indochine avant la Seconde Guerre mondiale", p. 22.

⁶⁰ Brévié, Letter to the Minister, April 16, 1937. As quoted by Hémery, *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Among the commitments made by the new government was the creation of a commission of inquiry to examine colonial conditions and suggest reforms.⁶¹ Vietnamese nationalists, particularly ones in the South, greeted the news of a visit from an inquiry commission with enthusiasm. Led by Southern radicals such as Nguyen An Ninh, and communists and Trotskyites, Vietnamese activists began organizing an Indochinese congress to put together a list of people's demands to be presented to the inquiry commission.⁶² The momentum of organizational activities frightened the colonial administration and French *colons*. Consequently, by the Fall of 1936, steps were taken to curb the Indochinese congress movement, and finally in October the Governor of Cochinchina had three leading organizers, Nguyen An Ninh, Nguyen Van Tao, and Ta Thu Thau, arrested.⁶³

To the disappointment of Vietnamese nationalists, the inquiry commission's visit to Indochina was postponed, and in its place Labour Minister Justin Godart was sent to observe conditions in January 1937.⁶⁴ The goal of his mission was to study issues concerning labour, hygiene, and social legislation.⁶⁵ Godart's mission did not reveal any new insight into the problem of poverty in Indochina. His analysis was essentially the same as that of earlier administrators and researchers, identifying fragmentation of land holdings, overpopulation, usury, and unfair monopolies as the problem. First on Godart's list of recommendations was one regarding native undernourishment. Godart suggested that rice be stockpiled to ensure the population would have food and that only the surplus could be exported.⁶⁶ Other recommendations included: to

⁶¹ Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, p. 240.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 244-245.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁶⁵ Justin Godart, *Rapport de Mission en Indochine--1er janvier-14 mars 1937*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994.

⁶⁶ Godart, *Rapport de Mission en Indochine*, p. 177.

make sure that communal lands were redistributed every three years and put a stop to forced sales of land by usurers; to improve the system of agricultural credit for small landowners; to instruct the administration to support the creation and function of cooperative societies; and to abolish state monopoly of gambling and opium, and reassess the present system of forced alcohol-consumption.⁶⁷

Of the last recommendation Godart wrote: "Prohibit the use of the tricolour flag as a sign for opium and alcohol shops."⁶⁸ This sharp contradiction in the use of the tricolour, the symbol of French republicanism and of French civilization, as a shop sign for substances associated with social deterioration and malaise, had already been exploited by Vietnamese fiction writers, from Nhat Linh and Tam Lang to Nguyen Cong Hoan. That the Popular Front government should ignore Godart's recommendation to ban opium and gambling, and at the same time cling to the rhetoric of "civilizing" mission, shows that they were underestimating the challenge of the growing anti-colonial sentiments among the colonized.

Upon Godart's return from his tour, another inquiry commission was created on January 30, 1937. There was fierce protest from French *colons* about the inclusion of two critics of French colonialism, Andrée Viollis and Louis Roubaud, in the commission. To quell their anger, the commission was not scheduled to go to Indochina, but would examine colonial issues from Paris.⁶⁹ In early 1938 information was being collected for the Inquiry Commission. Topics relating to living conditions of the people included cooperative societies, credit institutions, overpopulation, social assistance, migration to the highlands and the South, and land fragmentation.⁷⁰ The information collected on land holding in

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁶⁹ Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam*, p. 248.

⁷⁰ Fonds de la Résidence Supérieure au Tonkin (RST) 75.357 *Renseignements demandés par la Commission d'Enquête dans les territoires d'Outre Mer sur l'agriculture, la propriété foncière et la situation des paysans au Tonkin, 1937-1938*. National Archives Number One of Vietnam, Hanoi.

Northern Vietnam reinforced the portrait painted by ICP writers, Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap. The reports from this inquiry showed that the majority of the peasants did not have enough land on which to subsist. The Resident of Ha Dong province, for instance, reported that about 79 percent of the landowners had less than one *mau* (.36 hectare).⁷¹ Similarly, in Nam Dinh 78.9 percent of holdings were less than one *mau*. Estimates made in Chapter Two suggest that one *mau* of land with favourable conditions, and two harvests, would be able to produce enough rice for three adults, leaving at best a tiny surplus. The reports from the provinces, therefore, showed that at the best of times the majority of the people were barely meeting their dietary needs. This information reinforced Pierre Gourou's findings for 1938. According to Gourou, about 60 percent of the households in Tonkin did not have enough land for subsistence and needed to work as labourers or lease additional land.⁷²

As for actions taken during the Popular Front period those that were of some significance, and often cited by historians, were the freeing of political prisoners, the easing of restrictions on publications and political activities, and the legislating of the labour code. Even with these seemingly solid 'accomplishments' there are doubts about how much improvement they brought to the colony. The labour code, for example, was largely ignored and ineffective.⁷³ Agrarian measures, to which Truong Chinh and Giap referred above as Brévié's "peasant policy", included anti-famine measures (which will be examined in detail below); legislation against usury, reorganization of agricultural credit system; increasing aid to rice farmers; executing agricultural

⁷¹ Gallois-Montburn, Resident of Ha Dong to the RST, No. 2253-A, February 9, 1938, RST 75.357.

⁷² Pierre Gourou, "The Standard of Living in the Delta of the Tonkin" French Paper No. 4, Ninth Conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations, Hot Springs, Virginia, January 1945. p. 1.

⁷³ Panivong Norindr, "The Popular Front's Colonial Policies in Indochina: Reassessing the Popular Front's 'Colonial Altruism'", in Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, eds., *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front. Hope and Disillusion*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999, pp. 241-242.

hydraulic programs; and encouraging migration.⁷⁴ These measures have been cited by historians as evidence of the humanitarian and reformist intentions of the Popular Front government, that there was at least a genuine concern and political will to improve the lives of the poor in the colonies.⁷⁵ The examination below of the discourse on famine prevention will show how difficult it was to translate good intentions into concrete results, particularly when no financial help accompanied the plan.

Famine and *L'Office de l'Alimentation Indigène*:

In June 1936 Marius Moutet, the Minister of Colonies, informed the heads of the French colonies that he was conducting a study on the problem of famine and wanted to know about occurrences of famines in the colonies and measures that had been taken to prevent future disasters.⁷⁶ This inquiry led to the creation in 1937 of *l'Office de l'Alimentation Indigène* (Office of Native Nourishment) in Indochina. In his circular to the Governor Generals, Moutet criticized the lack of action in the past to deal with famines, and pointed to the fact that even when famine-prevention policies had been formed, they were rarely put into practice.⁷⁷ He cited an example from an unspecified African region where famines had been raging. In 1922-1923 the governor of this area set up granaries, but nearly ten years later, despite the fact that grain reserves had supposedly been established, the most fatal famine that Africa had known, broke out. The French administrators had blamed indigenous leaders for pillaging the reserves, but Moutet remarked that it was not the men who were at fault, but the system they

⁷⁴ Hémery, "Aux origines des guerres d'indépendance vietnamiennes: pouvoir colonial et phénomène communiste en Indochine avant la Seconde Guerre mondiale", p. 27.

⁷⁵ Panivong Norindr cites historians J. Marseille and C. Coquery-Vidrovitch as examples. Norindr, "The Popular Front's Colonial Policies in Indochina", pp. 241-242.

⁷⁶ Moutet, Minister of Colonies to the Governor Generals, No. C. D. 6, June 24, 1936, RST 75.782 *Reinseignements demandés par le Conseil Supérieur de Colonisation*.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2 (my count).

had to manage. Thus Moutet instructed the heads of the colonies to consult with native leaders in coming up with measures to prevent famines in order to ensure that their plans were culturally appropriate.

Almost six months later, A. Silvestre, the interim Governor General for Indochina, responded.⁷⁸ Silvestre began his report by pointing out that since the French arrived in Indochina, famines had been rare and had never been so grave as they were in other places.⁷⁹ He attributed this accomplishment to the geography of the country and also to preventative measures taken by the colonial administration in Indochina. According to Silvestre, first among the famine prevention measures taken was the improvement of the infrastructure: dikes, roads, and systems of irrigation and drainage.⁸⁰ Second type of measures included improving agricultural methods and yields. Silvestre continued to report that diversification of crops and the development of sericulture were being encouraged by the administration. As a result, Silvestre stated, the population no longer had to fear famine. Nevertheless, the report continued, natural catastrophes still at times caused regional shortages, particularly in the overpopulated Tonkin delta.

Connected to these periodic regional subsistence crises, Silvestre saw two problems: overpopulation and the organization of aid. To solve the first problem, Silvestre stated that the Colonial administration had been making enormous efforts to encourage migration to the highlands, South Vietnam, and Cambodia. Despite their efforts, settlers did not stay long term. Silvestre blamed this failure on the Vietnamese deep attachment to their native village.

⁷⁸ Jules Brévié was appointed Governor General of Indochina in August 1936, but did not take his post until January 1937. Duong Trung Quoc, *Viet Nam nhung su kien lich su (Vietnam Historical Facts)*, vol. IV, 1936-1945. Hanoi: Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1989, p. 32.

⁷⁹ A. Silvestre, interim Governor General to the Minister of Colonies, No. 936-DEA/3B, December 10, 1936, pp. 1-7, RST 75.782 *Reinseignements demandés par le Conseil Supérieur de Colonisation*.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

To solve the second problem, Silvestre listed various provisions made in Indochina to meet emergency needs. In the budgets for Indochina and for the regions there were funds set aside under the title of "public calamity" or "unforeseen expenses".⁸¹ The administration of North Vietnam had also established a reserve fund, which at the time of the report had approximately 250,000 piastres. In addition to these funds, there were a number of relief organizations in Indochina. As an example he cited the creation in 1930 of the *Associations d'Aide Mutuelle et d'Assistance Sociale* (the Association of Mutual Aid and Social Assistance) that had Local⁸² and Provincial-level branches.⁸³ Silvestre praised these organizations not only for their work in canvassing donations and helping when calamities struck, but for their promotion of solidarity and volunteerism.

In February of 1938, eight months after his first communication to the colonies regarding famines, Moutet responded to the reports he received from the colonies. In this letter Moutet shifted his focus from famine to undernourishment, stating that the colonial reports showed him that still too much of the indigenous population was living in a state of "quasi-permanent undernourishment".⁸⁴ Moutet stressed that the essential goal was to ensure that indigenous people of all places and during all seasons were able to satisfy their hunger.⁸⁵ With regard to famine prevention, he instructed the heads of the colonies to make sure that grain reserves and methods of rapid distribution be

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸² The colonial administration of Indochina was divided into three levels: General, Local and Provincial. The General administration encompassed all five regions of Indochina. The Local administration referred to the regional level: Tonkin, Annam, Cochin China, Cambodia, and Laos. The Provincial level was under the Local administrative control of each region.

⁸³ In 1937 the RST reported that the Tonkin branch of the Association had 80,000 piastres at its disposal and had been instrumental in helping with emergency relief after the 1933 typhoon and 1935 flood. Tholace, RST to the Governor General, No. 3.685 AE, March 5, 1937, p. 5, RST 75.782.

⁸⁴ Moutet to the Governor Generals, No. CD4, February 10, 1937, RST 75.782, p. 1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

established. In short, Moutet wanted the French administrators to be prepared and to make the well-being of the colonized people a priority.

Rather than perceiving this predominant existence of absolute poverty as a clear failure of the French "civilizing" mission--that after over half a century of French colonial rule, Indochinese were still undernourished and poor--Moutet instead reaffirmed the seemingly outdated, and absurdly hollow rationale for holding onto the colonies. Moutet predicated his affirmation of the "civilizing" mission on the need to show the indigenous population that they could, through providence and mutual help, defeat poverty:

Although one seems to have the tendency to exaggerate his [the native's] indolence and fatalism, there is no doubt that our efforts to improve his sort will at times clash with the native himself.

This should not amaze us. Enslaved for millennia by the caprice of the forces that are beyond them, the native has necessarily taken the habit of submitting to [the forces] without even dreaming of defeating them, and living day-by-day carefree of a future to which he has resigned himself in advance...

But this is precisely the true grandeur of our civilizing role, which is to emancipate the colonial masses from this servitude. As part of humanity, we have been given the trusteeship for which we teach him how to provide for himself, to defend himself, to overcome [his obstacles], and finally to gain confidence in himself. This is therefore a humane education of the individual that we must undertake and we achieve it with him learning at once of providence and mutual help.⁸⁶

Taking his cue from Moutet, the Governor General of Indochina in February of 1937 instructed the Local administrators to set up Local and Provincial Offices of Native Nourishment, which would coordinate their efforts with the Central Office in an effort to avoid famines.⁸⁷ At the provincial level, the

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁷ Circular from the Office of the Governor General to the Chiefs of Local Administration, No. 24 DEA/2B, February 22, 1937, pp. 1-7, RST 75.782. The circular was signed by an administrator, whose name I am not able to make out.

office would diffuse new agricultural knowledge and encourage initiatives, would inform the Local and Central offices of the state of each season's harvest, and would provide assistance to Provincial chiefs regarding emergency aid.

Governor General Brévié's circular did not make clear how the creation of these Offices of Native Nourishment, staffed by government functionaries and agricultural experts, would fulfill his proclaimed objective to "awaken sentiments of altruistic providence in individuals, encourage and guide goodwill and generosity."⁸⁸ Brévié vaguely stated at the end of his circular that the "mobilization of goodwill is bound to result automatically through their intermediary."⁸⁹ As to what he meant by intermediary was unclear.

What was clear, however, was that the Local and Provincial administrators would not be receiving money for the creation of these offices. Instead, the Governor General suggested that the Local Office "coordinate its resources", and form close liaison with the respective Association for Mutual Aid and Social Assistance, which had a significant fund.⁹⁰ For the Provincial Offices, which bore the pressure of daily and direct contact with the population, Brévié stressed that these offices would require an immediate access to funds in order to come to the relief of the population. Money could be made available, he suggested, from the special providence funds or from the reserve funds of the provincial budgets.

From the perspective of the Resident Superior of Tonkin, this lack of financial assistance for the new office posed a problem. In May 1937 Delsalle, the interim Resident Superior, reported to the Governor General that the Association for Mutual Aid and Social Assistance was being reorganized into two

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

sections.⁹¹ One section would continue the functions of the Association for Mutual Aid, while the second section would perform the role of the Office of Native Nourishment. The Association for Mutual Aid and Social Assistance, with its central committee and associated provincial branches, was a government organ created in 1930 to organize relief, mobilize donations, and sponsor fund raising campaigns. It was managed and organized mostly by elite Vietnamese, such as its Local president, Hoang Trong Phu, the Governor of Ha Dong province. According to Delsalle, this association had since 1932 distributed 122,000 piastres in Northern Vietnam and 112,000 piastres in Central Vietnam.⁹² In addition, the previous year's flood victims of Bac Ninh, Hai Duong, and Hung Yen provinces altogether received 34, 000 piastres from the Association. Delsalle stated that the financial situation of this association was already tight, but will be further strained if it had to shoulder the expenses of the Office of Native Nourishment. He revealed that membership fees and fund-raising activities of the Local and Provincial Associations alone were not enough to keep them afloat. As a result, Tonkin's share of the 1936 profit from the Indochinese lottery had to be distributed among the various provincial associations to augment their funds.

Delsalle requested some financial help. He asked particularly that a portion of the common providence fund for Indochina be made available to Tonkin. Created in 1936, this common providence fund was established by taking a third from a ten percent deduction in government public expenditure. According to the Governor General's February circular, the Central Office of Feeding Natives would be supported in part by this fund.⁹³ Delsalle claimed that

⁹¹ Delsalle, interim RST to the Governor General, No. 9.243 AE, May 27, 1937, pp. 1-5, RST 75.782.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹³ Circular from the Office of the Governor General to the Chiefs of Local Administration, No. 24 DEA/2B, February 22, 1937, p 5, RST 75.782.

the money diverted to create this common providence fund reduced the 1937 Tonkin budget by 40,000 piastres, money that would have otherwise been allotted for emergency relief.

Brévié refused the Residence of Tonkin's request for financial help in creating the Offices of Native Nourishment, stating that the common providence fund was meant for helping Indochina as a whole during a calamity.⁹⁴ Consequently, when Chatel assumed his post as the Resident Superior of Tonkin, he instructed the provinces on the creation of the Office of Native Nourishment; he wrote:

From the financial point of view, it is advisable to veer toward decentralization; each province will be able to face up, through proper means, to all the problems of aid, which confront them without any recourse to the Local Budget.⁹⁵

Chatel suggested they look for funding from the Association of Mutual Aid, from charity fairs, from the Provincial or municipal budgets, and from donations.

Chatel acknowledged the financial strain that the Association of Mutual Aid was in, but stated that the Local budget was also lacking extra funds and thus the solution was not to look for large subsidies from the administration, but to "develop sentiments of social solidarity and mutual aid".⁹⁶ Thus by default of a lack of funds, provincial administrators were forced to rely on donations and charity to fund their new Office of Native Nourishment. In so doing, another lofty aim of the Minister of Colonies was accomplished: to teach natives about mutual help and altruism.

⁹⁴ Brévié to RST, No. 488 Dea/lgt, August 30, 1937, p. 1, RST 75.782.

⁹⁵ Chatel to the Provincial Resident Chiefs and Commanders of the Military Territories, No. 441 AE, September 22, 1937, p. 2, RST 75.782.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

As genuine as Moutet's concerns for native welfare might have been, subsequent measures revealed a lack of commitment from the administration at all levels. In their responses, both the Governor General and the Resident Superior of Tonkin seemed more concerned with demonstrating to their respective superiors the accomplishments they had already made in the area of famine prevention. Although Moutet emphasized consultation with native leaders, the plan instituted in Indochina was virtually dictated to the various Local administrations by the Governor General's office. At first, the response from the Tonkin administration was to adapt the Association of Mutual Aid and Assistance to accommodate the role of informant and advisor, in addition to the Association's present task of social assistance.⁹⁷ Brévié, however, was not satisfied with Tonkin's plan and in his response enclosed a copy of the plan of the Governor of Cochin China for the Resident Superior to emulate.⁹⁸ Thus the Office of Native Nourishment of Tonkin resembled closely to the one set up in Cochin China. Moreover, by not providing extra funds for the new office, money would have had to be diverted from the Association of Mutual Aid and possibly any aid project it was funding to run another bureaucratic organ. Lost among the correspondence and reports was the original objective of preventing famine. It was supplanted by the bureaucratic imperative to follow directives and to produce results on paper.

⁹⁷ Tholace (outgoing RST) to the Governor General, No. 3685 AE, March 5, 1937, RST 75.782.

Conclusion

The process that led to the creation of the Office of Native Nourishment took place over a span of about a year, from June 1936 when Moutet first inquired about the occurrences of famine in the colonies to August 1937 when the office in Northern Vietnam was set up.⁹⁹ This process bore similarities to the famine-prevention inquiry initiated by Governor General Beau in 1906. As Chapter Four shows, the massive 1906 inquiry resulted in a less than impressive famine-prevention plan. Lack of time and space keep me from researching and assessing the performance of either the reserve fund (the result of the 1906 Commission on Famine Prevention) or the Office of Native Nourishment. What is clear is that localized famine and food shortages still occurred in Indochina, thirty years after Beau's inquiry. The French administration's attempt to solve the problems of periodic and permanent poverty inevitably clashed with its insistence on keeping Indochina a classic colony (in that the latter must produce profit for the mother country). As the writings from ICP members and others have shown, colonial policies such as direct and indirect taxes, forced-alcohol consumption, and mandatory *corvée* all directly and significantly devastated the lives of the poor just as much as natural disasters and bad harvests. Moreover, the colonial tax policy, its encouragement of land accumulation, and inability or refusal to control usury and high rents made peasants unable to maintain the basic level of subsistence. Thus while refusing to make changes that would profoundly improve the living conditions of the poor, the French colonial

⁹⁹ Brévié to the RST, No. 1355, May 11, 1937; Governor Pages to the Governor General, March 27, 1937, RST 75.782.

government continued to study problems of famine and undernourishment and to preach foresight and mutual aid to the natives.

In claiming the tutelage of the poor natives, the colonial administrators and the communist writers (as well as the bourgeois and collaborator writers) shared common ground. Both French administrators and Vietnamese writers examined in this chapter saw the poor as an undifferentiated mass needing guidance. Truong Chinh, Vo Nguyen Giap and Nguyen Cong Hoan viewed the poor peasants as ignorant, superstitious, and individualist. Ngo Tat To, however, saw the poor peasants as virtuous and innocent. What these writers seemed to agree on is that the poor peasants needed help in learning about their oppression and to organize against injustice, and that they, the intellectual elite, would provide guidance, like the Confucian village scholars of former times. In a similar fashion as the politically conservative journalists and the urban bourgeois writers, the writings of the ICP on poverty revealed their hybridized identities. While claiming to be modern in repudiating Confucianism as feudalistic and backward, and in advocating modern revolutionary action, the ICP intellectuals were still embracing Confucian morality and ethical principles.

⁹⁹ The Office of Native Nourishment was established in March 1937 in Cochin China. It is unclear whether or not similar offices were set up in Central Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Exploring the practices and writings on poverty and poor relief from the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the Second World War demonstrates that the notion of poverty was constituted by competing discourses. Writings of French colonial administrators and of Northern Vietnamese intellectuals proposed different explanations for the impoverishment of Vietnam. According to French colonial records for Northern Vietnam, the official explanation for poverty focused on natural disasters, peasants' 'backward' agricultural and cultural practices, and the corrupt and exploitative nature of village institutions and native leaders. French administrators emphasized that poverty, particularly in its most fatal form of famine, existed with intensity and unabated before French conquest. According to the colonial discourse the French did much to reduce poverty, such as constructing modern infrastructure, creating savings and lending institutions, introducing scientific agronomic principles, and teaching natives the necessity of mutual aid and providence.

Improving the living conditions of the colonized was, after all, an intrinsic part of France's justification for colonizing Indochina. The French 'civilizing' mission, a catch-all concept invoked to pave over the inherent contradictions between the French republican heritage and its colonial agenda, was supposed to bring both moral and material progress to the colonies. As late as 1939, at the outbreak of World War Two, the French colonial discourse was still dominated by the 'civilization' mission rhetoric. Colonial officials still insisted that improving the lives of the colonized was central to their presence in the colonies.

Nevertheless, exploitative colonial policies and practices along with an ambivalent attitude toward poor relief led to further impoverishment of Indochina. French politicians and colonial administrators inherited a set of contradictory ideas about poverty. On the one hand, the Enlightenment and Revolutionary periods provided a basis for the acceptance of state responsibility for poor relief. On the other hand, poor relief as practiced in both the *Ancien Régime* and in post-Revolutionary France still had at its core concerns about social control and discipline, rather than humanitarian aims. These contradictions were further complicated in Indochina where fear of anti-French rebellion, racial prejudices, and budgetary restraints made the colonial government less ready to assume responsibility for poor relief. The fact that the French 'civilizing' mission failed miserably to enrich the Vietnamese was seized upon by Vietnamese intellectuals, who were anxious about their own position within the colonial and postcolonial world.

One group of Vietnamese intellectuals examined in this dissertation were the political conservatives who dominated Northern Vietnamese journalism in the 1920s and early 1930s. As Chapter Five shows, this group saw poverty as a cultural problem, requiring the guidance of a modern and educated elite, like themselves. In their journalistic writings, poor relief took on many levels of meaning. Helping the poor was depicted as a civic duty within a modern, *van minh* (civilized) society. In this framework, fulfilling the duty of poor relief through participating in and organizing modern forms of charity was a way to contribute to

increasing national strength, and to help bring about Vietnam's eventual independence.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s this group of intellectuals was overtaken by a less accommodating intelligentsia who were more openly critical of the failure of the French 'civilizing' mission in the area of poverty reduction. Using gendered metaphors of the Vietnamese nation and of the Confucian moral order, the Self-Reliance Literary Group and the social realist writers demonstrated the shameful deterioration of Vietnamese society. Their message was that poverty demoralized the society and they associated this process with the loss of their country, in both the physical and spiritual sense.

The third group of writers examined was connected with the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). These writers were more forceful in pinning the blame for Vietnam's impoverishment and social malaise directly on colonial policies and on the corrupt Vietnamese landlord and official class. Their work suggested a need to organize the rural population to fight against the causes of their oppression: colonialism and capitalism. Despite the ICP's modernist belief that poverty could be eradicated through state policies, it shared with nineteenth-century Vietnamese Confucian kings the view that land and access to resources for a secure livelihood should be at the heart of poor relief measures.

While the analyses of poverty among the different groups of Vietnamese intellectuals varied, all three groups examined here saw the poor as an undifferentiated, illiterate mass bound by custom and tradition. The Vietnamese intellectual elite's discourses implied that they were the appropriate agent to help

the impoverished, either by teaching them about modern ideas about health and mutual-aid, organizing social assistance, or showing them they were oppressed and needed to fight against their oppressors. As with Indian nationalists, who found within the cultural/spiritual domain a space for the assertion of their hegemony¹, imagining the realm of poor relief afforded elite Vietnamese of various persuasions an opportunity to claim some form of authority within colonial dominance. Here the Vietnamese elite attempted to articulate the cause of their nation's lack of independence and formulate a solution under their vanguard. As with the Indian nationalists who were searching for a modern, but not Westernized, Indian culture, the Vietnamese intellectuals were grappling with the formulation of a *van minh* society that was neither completely Western nor completely Confucian. Steeped as they were in the traditional Confucian outlook and in Western cultural trends, the Vietnamese writers and journalists were envisioning a *van minh* society in which Confucian values, such as social harmony and responsibility, would be restored within an independent and strong Vietnamese nation.

This dissertation shows that the communists were not the only ones concerned about colonial poverty. The politically conservative and bourgeois intellectuals both tried to draw attention to the problem and to offer some suggestions for solving it. While both the non-communist and communist discourses offered hybridized solutions to poverty, the communists could be argued to have been the most neo-traditional among the three groups of

¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, ch. 1.

Vietnamese intellectuals examined here. Not only did the communist intellectuals reinforce the importance of Confucian morality and values in their discourse on poverty, they, as Nguyen Khac Vien suggests², reverted to using modernized versions of Confucian village scholars to mobilize the peasantry. As in the pre-colonial days, when village scholars acted as leaders of revolts during periods of hardship and injustice while claiming to be upholding Confucian ideals, the communist cadres cast themselves as defenders of morality and correct social behaviour. The difference was that communist cadres were disseminating ideas of modern class warfare. This strategy contributed significantly to their success in mobilizing rural support in their war against the French.

This examination of both the French colonial and Vietnamese elite discourses on poverty and poor relief supports the postmodern argument for approaching poverty as a discourse or as in colonial Vietnam, as a number of competing discourses. As such, this dissertation does not claim to reveal the reality of the colonial condition, particularly for the small landowners, tenant farmers, and urban labourers. It explores instead how poverty was perceived and appropriated by French colonial and Vietnamese elite elements, and shaped to advance each group's self-justification and *raison d'être*. The conclusions of this dissertation suggest that a history (or more precisely histories) of the peoples of Northern Vietnam under French colonialism, to the extent that the narratives give space to other competing voices outside of the male dominated intellectual

² Nguyen Khac Vien, "Confucianism and Marxism in Vietnam", in David Marr and Jayne Werner, eds., *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam*. Berkeley: The Indochina Resource Center, 1975, pp. 45-52.

elite, has yet to be written. The findings also suggest that more rigorous scrutiny be given to the contemporary theorization of poverty and practices of poverty alleviation.

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