

Widening the Colonial Encounter: Asian Connections Inside French Indochina During the Interwar Period

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Abstract

Relying on three inter-Asian colonial debates from French Indochina, this paper attempts to widen our analytical approach to the study of colonialism in Indochina beyond the ‘colonizer’–‘colonized’ opposition by factoring in the relationships among the diverse Asian colonized living within the colonial state without downplaying the important role Western colonialism played in transforming those very relationships or being affected by them. The French Indochinese case is helpful, for it suggests that inter-Asian connections did anything vanish, but rather intensified because of the colonial experience. Numerous Lao, Khmer, Vietnamese and Chinese subject elites continued to engage each other *and* the French in fascinating and sometimes heated debates about the political, legal, cultural and economic place each group held in French Indochina – or did not want to hold. This directly affected how they came to interact with one another in new ways, essential to understanding the complexity of the colonial encounter at the time and can provide new insights into post-colonial and international history. Lastly, this wider approach to studying the colonial encounter allows us to view the French side of the colonial equation from a new vantage point.

Introduction

It is rare in international history and colonial studies to talk about Asian connections during the colonial period. Scholars of colonialism tend to concentrate on one specific colonial state or on the relationship between the ‘colonizer’ and the ‘colonized’. International relations specialists are understandably more concerned with the sovereign entities of the time (the colonial states of British India, the Dutch Indies or French Indochina), rather than the state-less colonized.

The Asian side of the story in international relations usually resumes in 1945 with the onset of decolonisation and the birth of new nation-states (India, Indonesia or Vietnam). The emphasis in post-colonial studies on the opposition between the ‘colonizer’ – ‘colonized’ has also overlooked inter-Asian colonial connections. While the importance of this relationship is certainly crucial, it was not the only one defining the colonial experience. And by projecting this opposition into the past, we can sometimes exclude other ways by which the ‘colonial encounter’ (*la situation coloniale*)¹, to borrow Georges Ballandier’s famous expression, intersected in other complex and little studied ways at the time.² In all three cases, we learn little about how say colonized Vietnamese and Chinese or Burmese and Indians interacted with one another during the colonial period – both inside and outside the colonial states – or how this might have affected relationships with the colonizers.³

In this paper, I would like to argue that the dynamics of colonialism actually set into motion a new set of inter-colonial Asian connections, ones which directly affected the nature of the ‘colonial encounter’ in ways overlooked by the ‘colonizer’ – ‘colonized’ binary approach. Using colonial French Indochina as my case study, this essay seeks to widen our analytical approach to the study of colonialism in Indochina by factoring in the relationships among the diverse Asian colonized living within the new colonial state without however downplaying the important role Western colonialism played in transforming those

¹ Georges Balandier, ‘La situation coloniale: Approche théorique’, *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, Vol. XI (1951), pp. 44–79.

² Frederick Cooper, who recently warned against projecting such binary oppositions on to more complicated colonial situations at the time. Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 1–32.

³ However, new work is being done on Asian connections during the colonial period, both inside and in-between the Western colonial states. See, for example, Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007); Micheline Lessard, ‘Organisons-nous! Racial antagonism and Vietnamese economic nationalism in the early twentieth century’ in *French Colonial History*, Vol. 7 (2007), pp. 171–201; and Lorraine Patterson, *Tenacious Texts: Vietnam, China, and Radical Cultural Intersections, 1890–1930*, PhD (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2006). The Japanese have long blazed the trail on inter-Asian regional contacts, though what I have read has come via Vietnamese translation: Furuta Motoo, *Viet Nam trong Lịch Sử The Gioi (sach tham khao)* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri, 1998) and Masaya Shiraishi, *Phong trao dan toc Viet Nam va Quan he cua no voi Nhat Ban va Chau A: Tu tuong cua Phan Boi Chau ve cach mang va the gioi*, 2 volumes (Hanoi: Nha xuat ban Chinh tri quoc gia, 1999) to name only two of the most recent works of this kind. See also my *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution (1887–1954)* (London: Routledge, 1999).

very relationships. Numerous Lao, Khmer, Vietnamese and Chinese subject elites continued to engage each other and the French in fascinating debates about the political, legal, cultural and economic place each group held in the French Indochinese colonial state – or did not want to hold. This directly affected how they came to interact with one another and the French colonizers in new ways, essential to understanding the complexity of the colonial encounter at the time and can provide new insights into post-colonial and international history.

I use three inter-Asian colonial debates to make my point.⁴ The first one is a lively exchange between Vietnamese and overseas Chinese living in southern Vietnam, what I call the ‘Great’ Sino-Vietnamese debate. It lasted from 1919 to around 1923 and focused on new economic, political and cultural problems opposing the two sides. The second case study focuses on the ‘long’ Vietnamese-Cambodian debate of the 1930s. On one level, it provides a new look into how Vietnamese and Cambodians came to perceive each other in new ways at the time. On another level, it also shows how the French creation of the unprecedented colonial legal categories defining those living within Indochina gave rise to new interactions between these two groups as well as with the colonizer. For the third exchange, I use a 1935 colonial decision to change the legal standing of the ethnic Vietnamese living in Laos by placing them under the jurisdiction of Lao authorities. This lively exchange allows us to examine more closely how the Vietnamese, Lao, Khmer and French engaged each other over the questions of modern citizenship and its territorial boundaries, all of which would become major issues in post-colonial and international history from 1945. I conclude by suggesting how these little studied inter-Asian colonial trajectories could help us to widen our understanding of the colonial encounter in less binary and more connected ways.

Reconfiguring Inter-Asian Contacts in a Time of Colonialism

French colonialism profoundly affected how the formerly independent countries and peoples it subjugated would view each other in the

⁴ By ‘inter-Asian’ here, I mean exchanges among the colonized Asians residing within the French Indochinese colonial state (which consisted of the present-day Nation-states of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam).

future. By colonising eastern mainland Southeast Asia, the French placed a number of pre-existing kingdoms and their subjects within a larger colonial entity named the ‘Indochinese Union’ from 1887. No longer did local sovereigns direct their own foreign and internal matters, the French did. Pre-colonial kingdoms became subordinate sub-units or countries (*pays* was the colonial shorthand) of the Indochinese colonial state. The ethnic Vietnamese kingdom of Dai Nam (Vietnam) was dismantled into three colonial parts. ‘Annam’ in today’s central Vietnam and ‘Tonkin’ in the north became legally constituted protectorates, while ‘Cochinchina’ was transformed into a colony in the south.⁵ The French established a protectorate over Cambodia, while Laos became a complex amalgam of protectorates, kingdoms and military territories. The colonial division of Vietnam into three parts was based less on racial criteria than on the drawn-out nature of French colonial expansion between the second Empire and the Third Republic, the result of complex politico-legal and economic considerations, as well as the need to divide in order to rule. Significantly, the French also created colonial nationalities (*nationalité*) for each of the new territorial sub-units (*pays*), a point to which I will return below.

The creation of French Indochina reconfigured the nature of Asian contacts inside the new colonial state, as did the Dutch colonial project in ‘Indonesia’ or the British one in India. Most importantly, Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodians and a variety of ‘ethnic minorities’ were now living within the same state – a colonial one ruled by a European power. This was unprecedented. The Dai Nam Empire had never managed such an extensive state (though the French relied on earlier Vietnamese territorial claims to Laos and Cambodia to justify the making of colonial Indochina). Second, the French facilitated Vietnamese and Chinese immigration *to* and *within* all of Indochina. As in British Burma and Malaya, the mechanics of Western colonialism in Southeast Asia had important demographic, social and political effects, which would be a point of legal contention long after 1945 for nationalist leaders throughout the region. In 1874, an early

⁵ Yet the French themselves had to coin a term to refer to all three ethnic Vietnamese *pays*. They came to use the word ‘Annamese’, which technically only referred to the nationals of the territorial protectorate of Annam in central Vietnam today, but unofficially it was used to refer to all the ethnic Vietnamese living in Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin (as well as in Laos, Cambodia and outside the colonial state). Meanwhile, nationalists would revive ‘Viet Nam’ (the Vietnamese of the South) to evoke the national unity of the ethnically Vietnamese countries.

colonial census noted 4,452 Vietnamese out of a total Cambodian population of 746,424. In 1911, Vietnamese immigration weighed in at 79,050 for 1,360,188 Cambodians. Ten years later, however, the Vietnamese population in Cambodia almost doubled to 140,225 out of a total Khmer population of two million. While these numbers are subject to caution, the impact of French colonialism on Vietnamese movements is clear. The most visible manifestation of this increase in immigration obviously occurred in Cambodian urban centres, above all in Phnom Penh where the Vietnamese numbered only 18,990 in 1921, but represented 61.51% of the total urban population.⁶ There, they worked as bureaucrats, shopkeepers, policemen and tailors. They increasingly played a role in the colonial transformation of western Indochina, working away as mechanics, plantation workers, pumping gas and driving buses across the pre-colonial borders dividing Vietnam from Cambodia and Laos. In July 1936, the Cambodian population topped three million, with the Vietnamese numbering 191,000.⁷

The Vietnamese were not the only ones on the move during the colonial period. Across colonial Southeast Asia, European colonizers increased Chinese and Indian immigration to help man and build their colonial states. New shipping lanes, roads, railway lines, canals, buses, cars and even outboard motors led to increased movements of more people, who were moving faster and further than before. The colonial need for cheap labour in Southeast Asia, the coastal and maritime colonisation of China by foreign powers and the weakness of the Qing and subsequent nationalist states in China well into the 1920s only facilitated massive movements of Chinese immigrants into colonial parts of Asia. In 1879, there were some 45,000 Chinese living in Cochinchina. In 1921, the French counted around 156,000.⁸ Even more Chinese moved to the British Straits Settlement, while Indians immigrated to Burma to work in the British colonial bureaucracy and urban economy in Rangoon and Mandalay (Until the late 1930s,

⁶ Alain Forest, *Le Cambodge et la colonisation française: Histoire d'une colonisation sans heurts (1897–1920)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1980), pp. 445–448 and Khy Phanra, *La communauté vietnamienne au Cambodge à l'époque du protectorat français (1863–1953)*, Doctoral Thesis (Paris: Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris III, 1974), pp. 211–219.

⁷ Cambodge, 'Note de la Résidence Supérieure sur l'Etat social des populations du Cambodge et activité administrative', p. 2, file Bc, box 23, Commission Guernut, Centre des Archives d'Outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence, France [hereafter cited CAOM].

⁸ Tsai Maw-Kuey, *Les Chinois au Sud-Vietnam* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1968), p. 38.

Burma was part of a larger British Indian colonial state.). Indian civil servants circulated within the wider British colonial state, not unlike the thousands of Vietnamese pushing paper in colonial offices in western Indochina.

If Lao and Khmer nationalists would later resent this French reliance on the Vietnamese – and the Vietnamese the French economic dependence on the Chinese – both forgot that the French would have been just as willing to work with Vietnamese commercial networks had they existed or to recruit and dispatch Khmer and Lao civil servants or labourers to work in Hanoi, Saigon, or the mines of Hon Gay had the latter been so disposed. The French preferred instead to tap into pre-existing Chinese commercial networks and Vietnamese bureaucratic proclivities in order to operate their local Indochinese commercial networks, administration, public works and postal services on the ground. Moreover, Vietnamese elites collaborated with the colonizer in much greater numbers and with more fervour than the Khmer and the Lao. If the French developed a policy of ‘Franco-Annamese Collaboration’ with the Vietnamese after World War I, for example, they never created such a colonial policy for the Khmer and the Lao until the Japanese and Thais forced Vichy France to do so. And even then, it was too little and too late.⁹

Colonial stereotypes also influenced how the Asian colonized would come to view each other during the colonial period. From the outset, the French considered the Vietnamese to be more ‘industrious’, ‘intelligent’ and ‘cunning’, whereas the Cambodians and Lao were characterized as ‘childlike’, ‘sweet’ and ‘lazy’.¹⁰ Because the Khmer and the Lao were considered to be ‘indolent’, the French turned to the more ‘dynamic’ Vietnamese. Speaking of the Vietnamese working as civil servants in the *Résidence supérieure* in Cambodia in the 1930s, one French administrator said that they had ‘provided precious services while waiting for the Khmer to evolve sufficiently to take the place of the Annamese in his [the Khmer’s] own country: secretaries, technical

⁹ On Franco-Annamese collaboration, see: Agathe Larcher-Goscha, *La légitimation française en Indochine: Mythes et réalités de la collaboration franco-vietnamienne et du réformisme colonial (1905–1945)*, Doctoral thesis (Paris: Université de Paris VII, 2000).

¹⁰ These stereotypes are present in French official and non-official documents and discourses. For a nice example, see: Albert Peyronnet, Senator from Allier, ‘La rénovation du Cambodge’ in *Les Annales Coloniales* (31 March 1914). On this question, see Alain Forest, ‘Les portraits du Cambodgien’ in *ASEMI*, Vol. IV, No. 2 (1973), pp. 81–107.

agents, mailmen, doctors, and Indochinese veterinarians, etc.¹¹ Such arguments would be repeated as mantras throughout the colonial period and taken up in many cases by the colonized themselves. Biased though they were, these stereotypes impacted upon how Asians perceived each other and often reacted, as we shall see below.

All of this posed a problem for the French by the 1930s. For if they had justified their colonial intervention in Cambodia on the grounds that they had ‘saved’ the Khmers from being swallowed by the Thais and the Vietnamese in the nineteenth century, this claim was contradicted by the French decision to rely on Vietnamese bureaucrats and workers to run the lower but vital levels of the colonial state in western Indochina. Worse, their reliance on the ‘industrious’ and ‘dynamic’ Vietnamese did not please Cambodian and Lao colonial nationalists opposed to ‘historic’ Vietnamese expansion in this French colonial guise. By the 1930s, many French colonial administrators who had long lived and worked in the country knew it and began calling for policies that would directly affect the nature of inter-Asian contacts well into the post-colonial period (see the second and third debates below). Some became active supporters of western Indochinese interests, considering themselves to be more Lao and Khmer than the Lao and Khmers. Speaking of the problem of Vietnamese immigration to Cambodia, one French official wrote around 1938:

The immigrating French subject or protégé¹² undoubtedly has the right to our solicitude; however the indigenous [the Khmer in Cambodia] has fought too hard for his independence for the protecting country [France] to help develop [Vietnamese] colonies, who remain for the Cambodians ‘foreigners’. In his misfortune, the Cambodian turned to us in full confidence. By organising, administratively, mass migrations [of ethnic Vietnamese to Cambodia], we would run the risk of losing the friendship of the Khmer country (*pays*).¹³

That said, while the expansion of the pre-colonial Vietnamese state southwards had shrunk the Cambodian empire by the nineteenth century, marking the Cambodian memory, the two peoples were not

¹¹ Le Bon, ‘Résidence de Kratié, enquête no. 3’, sub-file Résidence de Kampot, Enquête no. 3, 1 June 1938, file Commission d’enquête dans les territoires d’Outre-mer, Enquête no. 3, Migrations intérieures, box 96, Commission Guernut, CAOM.

¹² That is: the ethnic Vietnamese from the Cochinchinese colony (subjects) or from the protectorates of Annam or Tonkin (protected subjects).

¹³ P. Chalié, Pursat, file Enquête no. 3-A Questions générales, not dated, box 96, Commission Guernut, CAOM (circa 1938).

always ‘hereditary enemies’. Nor were the Chinese and Vietnamese ‘eternal enemies’, in spite of some one thousand years of Chinese colonial rule of ‘An-Nam’, the ‘pacified South’. Sino-Vietnamese marriages were common long before the French arrived and Chinese traders had long contributed to the economic and cultural vibrancy of pre-colonial Vietnam. Nor were relations between Khmer and Vietnamese always antagonistic. Numerous uprisings in the nineteenth century even saw Vietnamese Catholics and Khmers joining hands together against colonial expansion.¹⁴ At the local level, there were mixed marriages between Vietnamese and Khmer and many southern Vietnamese could speak Khmer – and *vice versa*. The well-known Khmer nationalist, Dap Chhuon, had two Vietnamese wives at one point. Son Ngoc Thanh’s mother was Sino-Vietnamese. Ngo That Son, a ranking member of the Viet Minh in southern Vietnam after 1945, grew up in Cambodia, spoke flawless Khmer, studied at the *Lycée Sisowath*, and fought with Khmer anti-colonialists during the first Indochina war. And Vietnamese in Cambodia could even be part of Khmer cultural events at the local levels.¹⁵

The problem was that an increasing number of Vietnamese located in urban centres, pushing pencils in the colonial bureaucracy or toiling away on rubber plantations, bumped up against an urban-based Cambodian nationalist elite increasingly opposed to the growing role the Vietnamese were playing in the administration and development of *their* state, and increasingly angry at the French colonizer for allowing these ‘foreigners’ to do so. Rather than continuing to see the Vietnamese or the Chinese as important historical contributors to the development of the Cambodian and Vietnamese states as in the past, modern Cambodian and Vietnamese nationalists increasingly began to construct the Vietnamese and Chinese as ‘outsiders’, a threat to an emerging, inclusive national identity in the making during the colonial period.

French colonial legal categories reinforced this ‘othering’ by creating new social groups based, as noted, on race, the drawn-out nature of French colonisation, politico-economic imperatives,

¹⁴ Forest, *Le Cambodge*, p. 458 and his ‘Cambodgiens et Vietnamiens au Cambodge pendant le protectorat français (1863–1920)’ in *Pluriel*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1975), pp. 3–24

¹⁵ Ambassade de France au Cambodge, ‘Gorcé au MAE’, 2 March 1959, p. 4, volume 11, series Cambodge, grouping CLV [Cambodge Laos Vietnam], Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Paris, France and D.V.C., ‘Le théâtre cambodgien vu par un Annamite’, *Le Khmer* (11 January 1936), p. 2. We will explore the question of inter-Asian mixed unions in Indochina in a separate study.

and the need to divide and rule. Like the modern nation-states spreading across Europe in the nineteenth century,¹⁶ the colonial state not only created new territorially bounded spaces in the non-Western world, but it also introduced new legal categories defining who belonged to the colonial domain and its subunits – and who did not. For those living legally in the colonial state – the colonized – these new juridical categories counted, for they assigned them new legal identities regardless of how they defined themselves culturally, religiously, or nationally in their heads or in conversations at home, at work or while chatting in street cafés. However, in the Southeast Asian context, the creation of the ‘Dutch Indies’, ‘British Malaya’ and ‘French Indochina’ may have given rise to new territorially bounded states, but these colonial states – unlike their nationalist counterparts in Europe – did not necessarily create one homogenous, inclusive or corresponding colonial nationality or citizenship.¹⁷ Only politically independent Thailand and Japan were in a position to apply modern

¹⁶ Rogers Brubaker has argued for 19th France and Germany that the constitution of modern citizenship marked ‘a crucial moment in the development of the infrastructure of the modern state and the state system’ Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 72.

¹⁷ New scholarship has provided insights into the emergence of modern European colonial citizenship and its impact upon relationships between the colonizers and colonized and especially that of the *métis*, the offspring of mixed marriages between Europeans and ‘natives’. See: Emmanuelle Saada, ‘Paternité et citoyenneté en situation coloniale: Le débat sur les “reconnaisances frauduleuses” et la construction d’un droit imperial’ in *Politix*, Vol. 17, No. 66 (2004), pp. 107–136; her ‘Volontés de savoir coloniales: Les enquêtes sur les métis, 1908–1937’ in Gérard Grunberg and Monique Lakroum (eds.), *Histoire des métissages hors d’Europe: Nouveaux mondes, nouveaux peuples* (Paris, L’Harmattan, 1999), pp. 65–685; and her *Les enfants de la colonie: Les métis de l’Empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2007); Lora Wildenthal, ‘Race, gender, and citizenship in the German colonial empire’, in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 263–283. On colonial categories in Dutch Indonesia bringing in inter-Asian relationships, see Charles Coppel, ‘The Indonesian Chinese. Foreign orientals, Netherlands subjects, and Indonesian citizen’ in Barry Hooker (ed.), *Law and the Chinese in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), pp. 131–149 and C. Fasseur, ‘Cornerstone and stumbling block. Racial classification and the late colonial state in Indonesia’ in Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Late Colonial State in Indonesia: Political and Economic Foundations of the Netherlands Indies. 1880–1942* (Leiden: KITLV, 1994), pp. 31–55; Charles Hirschman, ‘The Making of race in colonial Malaya: Political economy and racial ideology’ in *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring 1986), pp. 330–361; and his ‘The meaning and measurement of ethnicity in Malaysia: An analysis of census classifications’ in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (August 1987), pp. 555–582. On the legal status of the Indian community in colonial Indochina, see: Nasir Abdoul-Carime, ‘Les communautés

nationalist notions of citizenship to territorially bounded nationalist borders. The Thais understood the power of modern nationality well, to the point of using their own racially constructed categories for nationality to justify the deconstruction of western French Indochina along Thai national lines.¹⁸

The French created unprecedented legal identities for the 'indigenous' (*indigènes*) living within French Indochina. Those born in the French *colony* of Cochinchina, the 'Cochinchinese', became, as noted, French subjects. Those coming from the protectorates (that is the 'Annamese', 'Tonkinese', Lao, Cambodian and the native denizens of Kouang Tcheou Wan) were considered legally to be *protégés français* (French-protected subjects).¹⁹ Ethnic Vietnamese born or residing in 'Cochinchina' were defined by colonial law as 'Cochinchinese nationals', while the Annamese and the Tonkinese enjoyed their own nationalities, respectively. There was no such thing as 'Vietnamese' citizenship, for Vietnam did not exist. Significantly for our purposes, no inclusive Indochinese colonial citizenship ever existed either.²⁰

indiennes en Indochine française', in *Siksacakr*, No. 7 (2005), pp. 19–24 and Natasha Pairaudeau, 'Other Frenchmen, Indian Renouçants in the colonial service in Cochinchina', paper presented at the *Euro-Viet Conference*, Saint-Petersburg, May 2002.

¹⁸ See: David Streckfuss, 'The mixed colonial legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai racialist thought, 1890–1910' in Laurie Sears, *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths: Essays in Honor of John Smail* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), Monograph No. 11, pp. 123–143; Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1994); and Soren Ivarsson, 'Making Laos our space: Thai discourses on history and race, 1900–1941' and Akiko Iijima, 'The *Nyuan* in Xaignaboury and cross-border links to Nan', in Christopher E. Goscha and Soren Ivarsson (eds.), *At the Crossroads: Contesting Lao Past* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2004), pp. 239–264 and 165–180, respectively.

¹⁹ In French colonial law, 'indigenous' (the equivalent of the British colonial term of 'native' at the time) referred generally to the 'aboriginal population' of a colonial territory that had been annexed by France (a colony) or placed under a protectorate or a mandate. *Sujets français* could be an indigenous Vietnamese from the legally constituted colony of Cochinchina, or those 'born in and resident in' the colonial 'municipalities' of Hanoi, Haiphong and Tourane (Da Nang). French *protégés* could be ethnic Vietnamese from the protectorates of Tonkin, Annam, Laos or Cambodia. Theoretically, French colonial law apparently considered Laos to be a colony and hence its members *sujets français*. Henry Solus, *Traité de la condition des indigènes en droit privés: Colonies et pays de protectorat* (Paris: Recueil Sirey, 1927), pp. 11–12, 35–45, 55.

²⁰ Significantly, inside the Indochinese colonial state, each *pays* was given its own colonial nationality. Even ethnic minority groups born within the colonial sub-units of Indochina were considered to be 'nationals' of one of those *pays*, each of which was defined in separate colonial civil codes. See, for example, *Code Civil de l'Annam*, (partie française), Hue, Imprimerie Phuc Long, 1936, p. 13, Livre Premier des Personnes:

The ethnic Chinese were classified as 'Asian foreigners' or *Asiatiques étrangers*. The French maintained and consolidated pre-existing Chinese congregations (*bang*) for their own economic interests. Unlike the Japanese, the Chinese were theoretically subject to Vietnamese law and courts as *Asiatiques étrangers* and not to French law. In reality, however, the Chinese congregational heads answered to the French colonial state, paid high taxes and continued to serve as economic intermediaries and sources of labour for the colonial power. According to the colonial legal specialist Henry Solus, the French categorisation of the 'Chinese' as '*Asiatiques étrangers*' was based on 'race' rather than on French notions of *jus solis*.²¹ Thus, by maintaining the congregations apart on racial grounds, the French made it harder to assimilate the Chinese to the local population during the colonial period and sowed the seeds for inter-ethnic clashes later on.²²

It is not sure that French colonial experts truly grasped the potentially divisive impact that their categories could have on relations among the Asian colonized and even for the survival of their own colonial state. And yet, one of the French Indochina's most eminent legal architects at the time, Ernest Hoeffel, had put his finger on the problem when he wrote the following:

To grant to a select few of them a particular legal status can be seen as a kind of privileged status, especially when it is analogous to the special status reserved for the nationals of the protecting people [the French]. This spreads the seeds of future dissensions, ever growing rivalries; it is tantamount to breaking the unity of the country, the cohesion of its interests and its normal social evolution.²³

Colonialism itself generated new set of inter-Asian exchanges within the colonial state. This is at the heart of each of the following three debates and the 'colonial encounters' they reveal.

Titre premier de la Nationalité, Articles 13, 14, 15, and 17. According to Article 14, non-Vietnamese ethnic minorities were considered to be defined legally as Annamese subjects: 'Sont également considérés comme sujets annamites tous individus issus de groupements ethniques non rattachés à une nationalité jouissant de la personnalité internationale et fixés de façon permanente sur le territoire de l'Annam'.

²¹ Solus, *Traité de la condition des indigènes en droit privés*, pp. 60–71 and also Louis Nicolas, *Les étrangers et le domaine cambodgien* (Paris: Éditions Domat, Montchrestien, 1934), p. 149.

²² Solus, *Traité de la condition des indigènes en droit privés*, pp. 64–65, 176 and Melissa Cheung, 'The Legal Position of Ethnic Chinese in Indochina under French Rule', pp. 35–36.

²³ Cited by Khy Phanra, 'La communauté vietnamienne au Cambodge', p. 313.

The 'Great' Sino-Cochinchinese Debate: Inter-Asian Relations in Colonial Times

One of the first major public inter-colonial Asian debates to hit the front pages of the Indochinese press occurred as World War I came to an end. The protagonists were the 'Cochinchinese' and the 'overseas Chinese' (*asiatiques étrangers*) in today's southern Vietnam, where Chinese immigration had always been heaviest.²⁴ This long and heated debate would last until around 1923; and it would resurface repeatedly into the 1930s, if not well into 1980s. Signs of Sino-Cochinchinese tension had emerged before World War I as a number of budding Vietnamese traders and businessmen tried to break into a domain historically dominated by the Chinese: commerce in general and the rice trade in particular. During 1907–1909, one of Vietnam's first modern businessmen, Bach Thai Buoi, took on Chinese traders in a fierce battle to carve out a place in the commercial sun for Vietnamese entrepreneurs. Indeed, Bach Thai Buoi was part of a new breed of Vietnamese merchants increasingly active at the time. They all, however, ran up against Chinese domination of local trading networks, especially in the transport, milling, distribution and rice trade in the Mekong Delta and Haiphong. If the Cochinchinese never dislodged the Chinese from their pre-eminent place in the southern economy before 1945, Bach Thai Buoi became something of a nationalist hero for holding his commercial ground in competition with them.²⁵

Economic change was of course behind a new set of Sino-Vietnamese relations. The development of an ethnic Vietnamese bourgeoisie and commercial agriculture during the colonial period was an important factor. In the south, Jacques Le Van Duc, Le Phu Mau, Nguyen Phu Qui, Nguyen Chanh Sat and Bui Quang Chieu among others had begun to take up the cause of Vietnamese trade and commerce. They

²⁴ Chinese immigration to Vietnam was greatest in the south, both before and during the colonial period. In 1921, the Chinese population there numbered around 156,000, whereas only 32,000 lived in Tonkin and 7,000 in Annam. By the late 1930s, the Chinese population in Cochinchina had grown to 171,000 or 3.7% of a total population of 4,616,000. Tsai Maw-Kuey, *Les Chinois au Sud-Vietnam*, pp. 38–39. While I do not read German, Thomas Engelbert, *Die chinesische Minderheit im Süden Vietnams (Hoa) als Paradigma des kolonialen und nationalistischen Nationalitätenpolitik* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002) is the most recent and single most comprehensive study to date of the Chinese in southern Vietnam during the colonial period.

²⁵ Nguyen Van Vinh, 'La mort de Bach Thai Buoi' in *L'Annam Nouveau* (24 July 1932), p. 1.

had the financial means, property and colonial connections to assert themselves in this area. In a bid to help loosen the Chinese grip on the rice trade, between 1912 and 1918, the French colonial government assisted them in setting up agricultural unions in the six southern provinces of Cochinchina. The French opened a commercial school in the south in January 1919, though it only attracted two students.²⁶ The Chinese served as models for Vietnamese emulation, too. The creation of the first Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Cholon in 1910 attracted much Vietnamese attention, as did the Chinese nationalists who were using boycotts against the Japanese in Asia and in Indochina in the wake of World War I.

Given that this budding Vietnamese economic nationalism was much more palatable to French colonial authorities than its anti-colonialist and more violent strains, a number of southern Vietnamese newspapers were able to publish in favour of the economic and agricultural modernisation of Cochinchina and of the 'liberation' of the southern Vietnamese economy from the 'foreign' Chinese. Some of the most important papers voicing such concerns were the *Thoi Bao*, *Co Minh Dam*, *Nam Trung Nhut Bao*, *Cong Luan*, and after World War I, the vibrant French language papers – *La Tribune Indigène* of Bui Quang Chieu and *L'Echo Annamite* of Nguyen Phan Long.²⁷ The French contributed to this. Governor general Albert Sarraut raised Vietnamese hopes that long awaited political changes were in the air when he spoke of undertaking colonial reform in collaboration with the Vietnamese, the privileged colonial partners of France in Indochina. The Vietnamese had made good on their promise of sending thousands of troops to Europe to support the *Mère Patrie* during World War I. In April 1919, Sarraut spoke of a new policy of 'Franco-Annamese collaboration', an 'Indochinese Charter', the creation of new political institutions, possible autonomy and the colonial modernisation of Vietnam.²⁸ Many Vietnamese allies felt that it would be possible to build a new and modern state in collaboration with the colonizer; and if not a Vietnamese one, then it would have to be an Indochinese one under the French, but with the Vietnamese at its helm, not the Chinese. The 'great' Sino-Vietnamese debate broke out in this larger politico-economic context.

²⁶ 'Boycottage des Chinois par les Annamites', pp. 3–4, d. Boycottage des commerçants chinois par les Annamites, cote 39827, GGI, CAOM.

²⁷ See also, Micheline Lessard, 'Organisons-nous!', pp. 171–201.

²⁸ Larcher-Goscha, 'La légitimation française en Indochine'.

So what set it off? On 1 August 1919, two coffee shops on Hamelin street in Saigon increased the price of a cup of coffee from 2 to 3 cents. Their clientele, mainly Vietnamese civil servants working in the Public Works offices nearby, reacted angrily to the news. Vietnamese editors, entrepreneurs and politicians quickly latched on to the incident to move against the Chinese. Economically minded southern Vietnamese papers like the *Thoi Bao*, *Luc Tinh Tan Van* and *Cong Luan Bao* exhorted the Vietnamese to avoid buying Chinese-made coffee and eventually boycotting all Chinese shops and goods.²⁹ By the end of the month, the press and nationalist-minded journalists turned a minor incident into a vitriolic crusade against the Chinese ‘strangle-hold’ over the Vietnamese and their economy. The Chinese papers responded in kind, underscoring the important role the Chinese played in the ‘modernisation’ of Cochinchina and in meeting vital Vietnamese needs. Vietnamese nationalists reacted angrily, when the overseas Chinese newspaper, the *Hue Kieu Nhut Bao* (The Overseas Chinese Daily), called the Vietnamese ‘ungrateful’ and ‘ignorant’ for criticising the Chinese role in southern economic affairs. If anything, the Chinese were alleged to have said, the Vietnamese should be thankful to the Chinese for bringing their ‘civilisation and their capital’ to their less developed neighbours to the south. Stereotypes of the worst kind were soon being bantered back and forth among these two colonized Asian groups.³⁰ Between 1919 and 1920, it would not be exaggerated to say that Cochinchinese newspapers were obsessed with the ‘Chinese peril’ and the need to break their perceived economic ‘stranglehold’ over the Vietnamese, while Chinese editors bemoaned Vietnamese ‘ingratitude’.

I don’t want to get bogged down in the details. What interests me here is how this exchange revealed new dynamics in Sino-Vietnamese interactions and points up the wider framework within which the colonial encounter was operating. For one, the Sino-Vietnamese exchanges provide us with glimpses into how pre-existing Vietnamese perceptions of the Chinese were being recast in increasingly exclusive and often racist ways and diffused to a wider readership than ever before. Thanks to the modern press, cartoons lampooning the

²⁹ See especially, *Thoi Bao*, No. 64 (1 August 1919), p. 1 and *Cong Luan Bao*, No. 242 (5 August 1919), p. 1.

³⁰ ‘Notre dette chinoise’ in *La Tribune Indigène* (24 April 1919), p. 1. Ten years later one Vietnamese still resented the Chinese accusations that the Cochinchinese were ‘lethargic’. ‘Les Chinois commencent à perdre le monopole du négoce au profit des Annamites: Le nationalisme commercial’ in *La Tribune Indochinoise*, No. 233 (28–29 June 1929), p. 1.



Figure 1 The Chinese merchant exploiting the Cochinchinese farmers and young women.³¹

'rapacious' and 'arrogant' Chinese traders were splashed across the front pages of southern newspapers. Slovenly dressed Chinese men were portrayed as stealing 'Vietnamese women' from the Nation and growing fat off of the blood, sweat and tears of the down trodden peasant. Racist slurs such as 'chec' (chink) became increasingly commonplace in the press. One gets a taste of this in the political cartoons reproduced in Figure 1. Fights broke out and Chinese merchants were often attacked, as anti-Chinese racism raised its ugly head in eastern Indochina.³²

Of course, anti-Sinicism was not just limited to colonial Vietnam. One Thai King at about the same time referred to the Chinese as the 'Jews of the Orient'. And true, anti-Chinese sentiments and violence had existed before the French arrived on the scene. However, the modern press, boycotts and the political cartoon accelerated the 'othering' of the Chinese along racialist, exclusive lines. The modern print media allowed local writers to broadcast their venomous anti-Chinese or anti-Vietnamese propaganda to a wider audience, while the modern political cartoon provided these bigots with a new way of communicating images of the 'rapacious Chinese' or the 'invading Vietnamese'. And by transforming the Chinese into this needed nationalist 'Other', Vietnamese nationalists had to forget the important economic and cultural role the Chinese and their trans-national networks had historically played in Vietnam and

³¹ *La Tribune Indochinoise* (7 October 1919), p. 1.

³² 'Est-ce que cela recommence: Un incident entre Chinois et Annamites à Vinhlong' in *L'Echo Annamite*, No. 7 (23 January 1920), p. 2.

above all in the south. And as elsewhere across Southeast Asia, the combination of the emergence of modern nationalism among the colonized and the special economic and legal privileges provided to the Chinese by the Western colonialists for the good of their colonial states reinforced the image of the overseas Chinese as a foreign threat and as a separate ethno-social group rather than as a key national player.

Second, while the Chinese may have been the Vietnamese target, this debate between colonial Chinese and Vietnamese saw the French colonizer get involved. Down below, French traders, journalists and editorialists often sided with the Vietnamese in this battle, sharing the latter's hostility for the perceived stranglehold over them.³³ Jean Morère at the *Opinion* publicly supported and lauded the boycott of the Chinese, showing how the colonizers could make common cause with the colonized against another social group in colonial society. Indeed, Morère was instrumental in stoking the anti-Chinese flames of the Vietnamese boycott.³⁴ Another sympathetic French ally argued that the Vietnamese were simply trying 'to unify themselves with the sole goal being economic [...] and thereby show their spirit of solidarity'.³⁵ Up above, the French Governor of Cochinchina, M. Maspéro, met with the disgruntled Vietnamese elites. On this occasion, one of Vietnam's most active economic nationalists, Nguyen Chanh Sat, presented a detailed report to the governor on this economic battle for life with the Chinese. Maspéro listened to their desiderata and promised action.³⁶ These Vietnamese economic patriots were, after all, Sarraut's main allies in the construction of a real policy of 'Franco-Annamese' collaboration. The French issued a few warnings and censured the wildly exaggerated editorials in order to head off possible race riots, but went no further.³⁷ And as noted above, the French created trade schools to help train young Vietnamese entrepreneurs and future commercial elite. While this was easier said than done, the entry

³³ The French editors of the *Opinion* stood firmly behind the Cochinchinese nationalists in 1919. 'Les Chinois en Indochine' in *L'Opinion*, No. 6091 (22 July 1919), p. 1.

³⁴ Jean Morère, 'Opinion d'un Saigonnais' in *Opinion*, No. 6107 (9 August 1919), p. 1.

³⁵ 'Annamites contre Chinois: Pour parer au boycottage' in *L'Opinion*, No. 6120 (27 August 1919), p. 1.

³⁶ 'M. le gouverneur Maspéro chez les commerçants et industriels annamites', *La Tribune Indigène*, No. 213 (14 October 1919), p. 1.

³⁷ 'Sinophobie et xénophobie' in *La Tribune Indochinoise*, No. 812 (29 December 1923), p. 1 and 'Boycottage des Chinois par les Annamites', p. 9.

of the colonizers into the fray shows that colonial alliances between the French and the Vietnamese were not always oppositional ones. Alliances could change in terms of the interests in question. And some French traders no doubted sided with the Chinese.

Third, this debate quickly stimulated wider Vietnamese reflections on their own identity. It was not enough to take on the Chinese on the economic battlefield; Vietnamese nationalists agreed that they had to change themselves in order to succeed. Editors in the south called upon their compatriots to consolidate their national solidarity. 'Organisation', 'unity' and 'solidarity' (*doan ket*) became the buzzwords in the early 1920s, on the lips of bourgeois economic nationalists running from north to south. This meant creating new associations, commercial clubs and even a chamber of commerce (as the Chinese had done) in order to bring together Vietnamese entrepreneurs. As one economic nationalist argued, the Vietnamese traders would then be able to 'meet in the evenings to chat about business in a leisurely way. The French have their sports and colonial clubs, the Corsican have [their own] associations, etc., where people of identical culture and similar tastes come together in the evening, after working hours, in order to discuss the events of the day or join in games and their favourite pastimes'.³⁸ *La Tribune Indigène* even thanked the *Overseas Chinese Daily*, albeit sardonically, for having awakened the 'lazy' and 'indolent' Vietnamese from their slumber.³⁹ This was a new type of Asian exchange occurring in the public sphere. And clearly, the Chinese, and not necessarily the French, were the mobilising force in this brand of economic Vietnamese nationalism.

One of the most important consequences of this Vietnamese interaction with the overseas Chinese was the creation of modern Vietnam's first national bank.⁴⁰ In order to break the hold of the Chinese, the Vietnamese sought to establish a credit institution under their full control. In mid-1919, as the boycott fever raged, southern nationalists met to form an Executive Committee for a Cochinchinese lending association. Nguyen Phu Khai became president, while Nguyen Chanh Sat and Tran Quang Nghiem served as vice presidents.

³⁸ 'La solidarité annamite' in *La Tribune Indigène*, No. 99 (29 August 1919), p. 1.

³⁹ 'Un peu d'histoire' in *La Tribune Indigène* (3 April 1919), p. 1.

⁴⁰ Micheline Lessard and Philippe Peycam also take up the boycotts and the emergence of economic nationalism in early twentieth century Vietnam. See, Micheline Lessard, 'Organisons-nous!', pp. 171–201 and Philippe Peycam, *Les Intellectuels Sud-Vietnamiens, Essai d'un phénomène émergent, 1917–23* (Paris, Diplôme d'études approfondies, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (IVe section), 1996).

Many of the most important southern elites were on its board. This 'Economic Organisation' came to life officially on 26 August 1919, as the boycott got underway, and was transformed the next day into the *Société commerciale annamite*. Its Vietnamese name – *Viet Nam Doan The Hoi* – uses the word 'Vietnam' to evoke a unified national idea. Indeed, this credit organisation would work to promote pro-Vietnamese propaganda and support Vietnamese commerce from north to south via the collection of funds and investment capital. It would be essential in getting 'national' businesses off the ground. As Nguyen Phu Khai put it, this bank 'will allow us to lessen some of the weight of the intolerable tutelage that the Chinese have over us'.⁴¹ The *Société commerciale* did garner important investment capital; and it would eventually be transformed into the first 'Annamese Bank' in late 1919.⁴² While this bank would never become an economic force, what is noteworthy for our purposes here is how this conflict with the Chinese led to its creation as an important element of an emerging Vietnamese national identity.⁴³ As one Vietnamese writer captured this unifying effect:

Is that to say that there is an irreducible opposition between the interests of the traders and the consumers? Not always, especially when the two sides are the nationals of the same country and when they are confronted with the presence, as is our case, of foreigners, in this case, the Chinese. We are dependent on them for the smallest of things that we consume, as well as for our clothes and food. Even the products coming from our own land arrive by way of their networks. [...] Confronted with this danger, do not we feel, Cochinchinese and Tonkinese, unified, since we are all children of Annam?⁴⁴

Another issue flowing from the 'Great' Sino-Vietnamese debate was the growing Cochinchinese resentment of the separate legal colonial status the Chinese enjoyed under the French. Particularly annoying

⁴¹ 'La différence sino-annamite' in *Le Courrier Saigonnais*, No. 143 (25 September 1919), p. 1.

⁴² B.C., 'Après trois mois de campagne' in *La Tribune Indigène* (30 October 1919), p. 1 and 'Viet Nam Doan The Hoi' in *An Ha nhut Bao*, No. 132 (11 September 1919), p. 1. One French report estimated that this bank had accumulated some 10 million piastres by the end of the year. 'Boycottage des Chinois par les Annamites', p. 11.

⁴³ B.C., 'Après trois mois de campagne', p. 1. It would be interesting to know more about the relationships between the Vietnamese and money lending Hindus from southern India, the so-called Chettys. Le Thang, 'Les Chettys' in *L'Annam Nouveau* (1 March 1934).

⁴⁴ Dac Van, 'La solidarité' in *La Tribune Indigène* (1 April 1919), p. 1. Our emphasis. 'Annam' here is clearly being used in the wider territorial and national sense of 'Vietnam'

for these nationalists was that the colonial category, *Asiatiques étrangers*, located the Chinese outside of direct Vietnamese national control, both in terms of limiting immigration to southern Vietnam and in terms of defining who and who would not belong there. 'Yes, by the generalized infiltration of a prolific and inexhaustible race and one which does not assimilate, the Chinese are a real danger for Indochina', one nationalist lamented. Cochinchinese elites asked colonial administrators to control this influx in light of Vietnamese interests in their own 'country'.⁴⁵ Vietnamese nationalists objected to the legal existence of the five Chinese congregations (conveniently forgetting that the French had continued a policy first implemented by the Nguyen kings themselves). They also opposed the existence of a special colonial status for the Chinese as *Asiatiques étrangers*. To the Vietnamese, all of this allowed the Chinese to run a 'State within a State'. As one Cochinchinese editorial put it on the front page of *La Tribune Indigène* in October 1919:

It is the Chinese congregation as it exists and functions that poses the problem. This particular organisation, which creates a *State within a State*, is the original mistake which we, the indigenous people pay the price today while waiting on the French to suffer its consequences, as much as if not more than us. [...] Within the organisation of the congregation, the French government, for its own tranquility and convenience abdicated a part of its powers to the congregation heads, said to be elected. As long as the taxes come in and public order is not threatened, the Chinese have the right to take care of their own problems among themselves, they have their own justice system, schools, budget, houses, clubs, associations, goods, in short they constitute, thanks to the will of the French government, independent states. [...]⁴⁶

In the north, the well-known intellectual, educator and future Prime Minister of Vietnam in mid-1945, Tran Trong Kim, published the travel notes of his 1923 trip to Hai Ninh province located along the Sino-Vietnamese border. Having witnessed with his own eyes the increase of Chinese into border regions and upset by their legal special status, Tran Trong Kim published his travelogue with a clear message in mind: stop Chinese immigration and transform those living in Tonkin into Tonkinese or, better yet, 'Vietnamize' them all. Like his southern compatriots, he warned of the national dangers of Chinese immigration, their preponderant role in northern commerce and of

⁴⁵ B.C., 'Les Chinois sont un danger pour l'Indochine' in *La Tribune Indigène* (28 October 1919), p. 1.

⁴⁶ 'Une organisation qui fut une grave erreur' in *La Tribune Indigène*, No. 210 (7 October 1919), p. 1.

the need for Vietnamese to act now to prevent the creation of a state within a state. For Tran Trong Kim, defining and controlling legal categories was crucial to the Vietnamese ability to transform the Chinese (and the Nung) into ‘Vietnamese’, or, at least in the colonial context, to naturalize them as a ‘Tonkinese’. Following on the Sino-Cochinchinese debate of 1919, Tran Trong Kim’s voyage to Hai Ninh convinced him of the need to assimilate the Chinese and to compete with them economically.⁴⁷

Lastly, the Sino-Vietnamese debate even triggered wider inter-Asian reflections on such questions as ‘modernity’, ‘progress’ and ‘civilisation’. For example, while the Vietnamese acknowledged the historical and cultural influences of the Chinese on Vietnam, in the context of this nationalist debate with the Chinese, the Cochinchinese represented themselves in a new, superior position in light of their special alliance with the French in Indochina.⁴⁸ In one of the more fascinating offshoots of this exchange, Cochinchinese nationalists turned to French culture, science and Western civilisation in order to counter Chinese claims to civilisational and economic superiority. In November 1919, *La Tribune Indigène* fired back that because of French colonialism, the Vietnamese were now more modern than ever and capable of competing culturally with the Chinese: ‘Western education has had the effect of penetrating into the large popular mass of the land of Annam. There, men and things are no longer seen in terms of the secular Chinese culture of our ancestors. If we are not yet [entirely] Westernized, we have ceased to be ‘sinified’ (*chinoisés [sic!]*)’.⁴⁹

Missing from these building legal debates on nationality and pretensions of cultural superiority, however, was any Vietnamese mention of the fact that, like the Chinese in Cochinchina, the Vietnamese enjoyed many of the same special legal rights in Laos and Cambodia and made remarkably similar claims to civilisational superiority and progress there in order to justify their own colonial privileges. Unsurprisingly, the Lao and the Khmer would counter

⁴⁷ Tran Trong Kim, ‘Su du lich dat Hai Ninh’ in *Nam Phong*, No. 71 (May 1923), pp. 383–394. During a trip to Saigon in 1922, Pham Quynh, Nguyen Van Vinh, and Pham Duy Ton had discussed with their southern counterparts the importance of the ‘Chinese problem’. They spoke to none other than Truong Van Ben, Le Quang Liem and Nguyen Chanh Sat. Pham Quynh, ‘Phap-du hanh-trinh nhât-ky’ in *Nam Phong*, *IDEM*, No. 58 (April 1922), pp. 253–257.

⁴⁸ ‘Notre dette chinoise’ in *La Tribune Indigène* (24 April 1919), p. 1.

⁴⁹ ‘La féclure sino-annamite’ in *La Tribune Indigène* (15 November 1919), p. 1.

along lines remarkably similar to those developed by the Vietnamese in opposition to the Chinese. The colonial encounter cut in many ways.

The Long Vietnamese-Cambodian Debate of the 1930s

If the Vietnamese regretted not being able to turn the Chinese into Vietnamese, a decade later, many of these same Vietnamese fought tooth and nail against Cambodian efforts to limit Vietnamese immigration, expel them or transform them into Cambodians. During the 1930s, Vietnamese, Cambodian and French elites became involved in a fascinating exchange focused mainly on two issues: (1) the Cambodian legal right to assimilate the Vietnamese into Cambodian nationals and (2) the Vietnamese attempt to block this Cambodian assimilation by advocating a wider, inclusive Indochinese citizenship based on the colonial model. An inclusive, Indochinese citizenship, it was thought, would allow the Vietnamese to live, work and move in western Indochina free of Cambodian and Lao assimilation, whether it be colonial or national.

It was just a question of time before an incident brought the question of colonial nationality into the open. It occurred in early October 1931, when *La Presse Indochinoise* reported that the *Résident supérieur* had unilaterally expelled to Cochinchina an ‘Annamese mayor’ (meaning an ethnic Vietnamese village leader here). This decision was apparently the result of a local altercation between his village and Khmers living in the area. *La Presse Indochinoise* asked whether the colonial state had the legal right to expel this ‘Annamese’ from Cambodia, since this particular individual had been born in the *pays* of Cambodia. After all, it was argued, the French assimilationist conception of nationality, *jus solis* in particular, theoretically should turn anyone born in that territory (the *pays* of Cambodia) into one of its nationals, regardless of ethnicity. But did the French concept of nationality apply in the colonial state and to its colonized, the paper asked? ‘What is the legal status of an Annamese born in Cambodia?’ it continued. Thinking in Republican terms, the French editors defended the Annamese/Vietnamese individual born in Cambodia along metropolitan lines: ‘In France, a foreigner who is born there [in France] is French. But here, in [colonial] Cambodia? We would be very happy to be informed of this matter. And this is a useful matter [to elucidate]: For here we will have all the Annamese [ethnic Vietnamese] in Cambodia who are going to have a reason to begin shaking, if the bizarre procedure that we have noted becomes a

regularized one'.⁵⁰ In other words, could a fellow colonized of the same French Indochinese colonial state be deemed – legally – a 'foreigner' in one of its member *pays*, especially if he/she had been born there? And to what degree would ethnicity/race – and not place of birth – determine legal belonging in this colonial context? This was clearly an important question for those threatened by expulsion or for those determined to control immigration. It also brings out the complexity of the colonial encounter in revealing ways.

Shortly thereafter, a second essay appeared, penned by a Vietnamese who had consulted a French lawyer about the *Résident supérieur's* recent decision. According to this legal expert, the *Résident supérieur's* decision to expel the Annamese was 'illegal', because the Annamese in question had been born in the *pays* of Cambodia. This didn't change the outcome: the Vietnamese mayor in question was forced to leave Cambodia. As this Vietnamese writer asked his readers, 'are we thus at the mercy of any decision to run us out of this country?'⁵¹

Imagining Cambodian Colonial Nationality: Assimilation or Exclusion?

In 1934, *La Presse Indochinoise* set off a bigger debate, when it published a series of Vietnamese letters critical of the Khmer mentality and ingratitude towards the Vietnamese and what they had done for the development of western Indochina.⁵² Just as the *Overseas Chinese Daily's* critique of Vietnamese 'lethargy' and 'ingratitude' had intensified the Sino-Vietnamese debate focused on economics in 1919, so too did an equally insensitive stereotype bring Vietnamese and Khmer nationalist elites into heated confrontation over the question of legal identity. While I unfortunately cannot identify their real identities,

⁵⁰ 'Point de droit: Peut-on expulser du Cambodge un Annamite qui y est né: Surtout quand il a raison' in *La Presse Indochinoise*, No. 346 (3–4 October 1931), p. 5.

⁵¹ 'Le statut des annamites nés et travaillant au Cambodge' in *La Presse Indochinoise*, No. 347 (10–11 October 1931), p. 6. Unfortunately, we have no study of such questions based on the legal archives of the Indochinese colonial state. If the colonized were writing in newspapers, they were most certainly trying to defend themselves before colonial courts. Such sources would provide a gold mine of information on such complex questions of nationality, race relations and social history. On the history of the legal status of the Vietnamese in Indochina, see, Jean-Christophe Careghi, 'Le statut personnel des Vietnamiens en Indochine de 1887 à 1954', Aix-en-Provence, Thesis, Université d'Aix-Marseille, 2002 (which I have not been able to consult myself).

⁵² Achay, 'Frères ennemis: Se résoudra-t-on enfin, à une politique ethnique au Cambodge ?' in *La Presse Indochinoise* (30 June – 1 July 1934), p. 5 and Nguyen Ngoc Qui, *L'Aurore cambodgienne* (7 June 1934).

four Khmer writers stand out in terms of their responses and arguments to the Vietnamese and the French: Nimo Rathavan, 'I.K.', Khémarak Bottra, and above all Khemeravanich, which means 'Khmer Commerce'.⁵³ While they all naturally objected to this pejorative characterisation of the Khmer 'soul', what really concerned them was the need to control continued Vietnamese immigration and assimilate those living in Cambodia into legal Cambodians.⁵⁴

Khemeravanich led the debate from the Cambodian side. On 1 July 1934, he initiated a long series of articles supporting Khmer grievances and opposing the privileged position and activities of the Vietnamese in colonial Cambodia. He argued that the colonial level of the Cambodian administration should be reserved for the Khmers, not the 'foreign' Vietnamese. He insisted that just as a Polish national would not be allowed to work in the French bureaucracy as a foreigner, so too should the Vietnamese be barred from working in the Cambodian civil service. The difference, of course, was that France and Poland were separate nation-states, whereas Annam (Vietnam) and Cambodia were legal sub-units of a larger Indochinese colonial state. In colonial law, the 'Annamese' were theoretically not 'foreigners' in French Indochina. Khemeravanich knew it, but he was thinking in increasingly nationalist terms: 'It's not the same thing, you will tell me. The Annamese is not a foreigner; he's an Indochinese and Cambodia is an integral part of the Indochinese Union. Ah! That beautiful Union! You said it yourself, I admit it, in your article. But after all, this Union, it has opened all our gates to the Annamese immigrants. The Union is the reason for all our troubles'.⁵⁵

Khemeravanich contested the viability of Indochina as a territorial identity for the Khmers. 'I'm not a jurist', he lamented, but 'was it we who instituted this Indochinese Union? Did anyone ever ask our opinion before creating it?'⁵⁶ The question now, he said, was to determine 'to whom does Cambodia belong?'⁵⁷ The answer was obvious, of course. Two weeks later, Khemarak Bottra responded

⁵³ Unfortunately, I have been unable to identify these four individuals. It seems clear that they are using *noms de plume*.

⁵⁴ Nimo Rathavan, 'Vraiment ? Cambodgiens et Annamites' in *La Presse Indochinoise*, No. 486 (21–22 July 1934), p. 6.

⁵⁵ Khemeravanich, 'Frères ennemis: Il y a, pourtant, place pour toute le monde au Cambodge' in *La Presse Indochinoise* (30 June – 1 July 1934), p. 6.

⁵⁶ Khemeravanich, 'Frères ennemis ?', p. 6.

⁵⁷ 'À qui donc appartient le Cambodge ?' in *La Presse Indochinoise*, No. 488, (4–5 August 1934), p. 4.

that Cambodia belonged to the Cambodians: 'Cambodia to the Cambodians and Cambodians for Cambodia'. This slogan was on the lips of budding Khmer nationalists everywhere in the 1930s.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, this mantra still left unanswered who could and could not be a member of this 'Cambodia'. Was it, for example, ethnicity or place of birth that defined membership? Khemeravanich provided in 1934 an assimilationist answer to this question. Non-Cambodian nationals such as the Vietnamese (and the Chinese) could become 'Cambodian' nationals. To turn the foreigners into Cambodians, he called for three things. First, *all* these denizens in Cambodia had to learn to speak Khmer. A common language would ensure their 'khmerisation', as he put it. Instruction in the Khmer language, he insisted, had to be made mandatory in all Cambodian classrooms, even for the Vietnamese and the Chinese. The school would be 'an excellent instrument' for the nationalisation of Cambodia's foreigners.⁵⁹ Second, Khemeravanich called for the creation of a Chair in Cambodian Literature in order to improve and enrich the Khmer language. Third, he requested that all 'Annamese' be held accountable before the Khmer courts.⁶⁰ On this last point, Khemeravanich was determined to terminate colonial categories, which had effectively granted extra-territoriality to certain Asians living on Cambodian territory by removing them legally from local law. Khemeravanich was willing to keep Cambodia colonial, but on the condition that the Vietnamese were assimilated to this wider Cambodian nationality.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Khémarak Bottra, 'Cambodge aux Cambodgiens et Cambodgiens pour le Cambodge' in *La Presse Indochinoise*, No. 490 (18–19 August 1934), p. 6.

⁵⁹ 'À qui devrait appartenir le Cambodge ?' in *La Presse Indochinoise*, No. 491 (26 August 1934), p. 6.

⁶⁰ 'À qui devrait appartenir le Cambodge ?' in *La Presse Indochinoise*, No. 491 (26 August 1934), p. 6.

⁶¹ Contrary to what is commonly asserted, the French language was not imposed at all levels of the colonial education system. Local languages and traditions continued to be taught for fear of creating 'uprooted' youngsters (*déracinés*) and revolutionaries. In Cambodia, the French also allowed instruction in Vietnamese in order to facilitate the training of their much needed Vietnamese bureaucrats. In 1918, Vietnamese was recognized as a local native language. In 1925, ethnic Vietnamese students in Cambodia could obtain the *Certificat d'Études élémentaire* in Vietnamese. The potentially divisive nature of this policy is obvious in light of the increasingly large numbers of ethnic Vietnamese living in urban centres and sending their children to school. In 1926, the proportion of Khmer students to Vietnamese ones in Cambodia was at 49%. In 1929, it increased to 53%. This language policy constituted an obstacle to absorbing the Vietnamese into the Cambodian national community Khemeravanich was envisioning above. Khy Phanra, 'La communauté vietnamienne au Cambodge',

Significantly, he was not arguing along ethnic, essentialist lines, but rather inclusive, assimilationist ones.

Another Khmer nationalist using the initials 'I.K.' chimed in along similar lines in 1937. He called for the mandatory teaching of the Khmer language in all public and private schools in Cambodia. Vietnamese should, in his view, only be allowed to be taught as a 'second foreign living language'. Second, he requested that all *Asiatiques étrangers* living in Cambodia, including the Annamese (ethnic Vietnamese), be held accountable before Cambodian courts. Finally, Vietnamese immigration had to be stopped momentarily in order to promote a policy of 'khmerisation' of Cambodia's ethnically diverse populations. Like Khmeranavich, I.K. was no ethno-culturalist. He insisted that Khmer nationality be given to any 'yellow child born in Cambodia'.⁶²

What worried Khmeravanich and I.K., like the Cochinchinese uneasy about the Chinese, was that continued Vietnamese immigration would create a mass of non-assimilated foreigners outside of Khmer national control: 'But these reforms of a scholastic and legal nature, designed to assimilate the Annamese [into Cambodians], will not be able to bear fruit as long as the immigration movement continues to intensify, as is the case for some time now'. And like the Vietnamese keen on controlling the Chinese, Khmeravanich called for a halt to Vietnamese emigration to Cambodia. He submitted his suggestions to the King of Cambodia, who, he said, still had important judicial powers as the head of a protected state. But again, he insisted that ethnic Vietnamese could and should become 'Cambodian', because 'Cambodia belongs to all of its members without racial or religious distinctions'.⁶³ An inclusive definition of colonial nationality thus had backers among the Cambodians in the 1930s, much to the surprise of the Vietnamese and the French.

Colonial Indochina or Colonial Cambodia? Choosing the Territorial Domain

The problem was that Khmer colonial nationalists had to deal with two potential territorial states: the nation-state of Cambodia

pp. 201–202. In 1923, 63 Khmer students attended the *Collège Sisowath* against 61 ethnic Vietnamese. In 1929, there were 246 Khmer students and 259 ethnic Vietnamese elementary students in the Sisowath school.

⁶² I.K., 'Réponse à l'aimable M. Vu Dinh Da: L'immigration annamite au Cambodge' in *La Presse Indochinoise* (2 September 1937), p. 4.

⁶³ 'À qui devrait appartenir le Cambodge?' in *La Presse Indochinoise*, No. 491 (26 August 1934), p. 6.

they were imagining in their heads and the Indochinese colonial state in which they were living as colonial subjects. While Khmer nationalists wanted to Khmerize the members of Cambodia, they were confronted by a major legal problem: Cambodia did not exist as an independent state. It was but a sub-unit (a *pays*) of the legally constituted colonial state called the Indochinese Union. This is where the Indochinese entity proposed by the French met increasingly fierce national resistance from Khmer nationalists, who saw the *pays* of Cambodia as the only possible bounded territory for defining citizenship, colonial or national. The emphasis on Cambodia and on an inclusive Cambodian nationality was the only way to halt Vietnamese immigration; for an Indochinese colonial state *and* corresponding Indochinese citizenship would prevent the Cambodians from controlling Vietnamese immigration into their *pays* and would instead assimilate the Khmers into a wider Indochinese citizenship in which they would be a minority compared to the ethnic Vietnamese.

Conversely, determined to head off the ‘Khmerisation’ of ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia, many Vietnamese understood the importance of pushing not only for the creation an Indochinese Federation, but also for the establishment of a corresponding Indochinese colonial citizenship. Hostile to just such a thing, Khemarak Bottra argued as follows to his Vietnamese readers tempted by the Indochinese idea:

Of course, Cambodia is not a province: It is a real country with its national patrimony and its consciousness of its future. Though it constitutes part of the Indochinese Union, it must be considered separate in terms of its development in all areas and in terms of the use of its resources. It can only be considered an integral part of the I.U. [Indochinese Union] in terms of its [foreign] relations and external security. [...] I can well imagine that the French ideal is to lead all of the Indochinese countries together. But nothing prevents it from [administering Indochina] by its parts [*pays*], in responding to each in terms of its own means. [...] and as for the accomplishment of its obligations in the future, France should adopt the idea of ‘Annam for the Annamese and Annamese for Annam’ just as she should support ‘Cambodia for the Cambodians and Cambodians for Cambodia’. There you have something which is entirely logical and equitable.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Khémarak Bottra, ‘Cambodge aux cambodgiens et cambodgiens pour le Cambodge’, p. 6. This slogan emerged in 1934 apparently. It was directly linked to increasing Khmer demands to have a bigger role in their administration and jobs. ‘À qui devrait appartenir le Cambodge?’ in *La Presse Indochinoise*, No. 491 (26 August 1934), p. 1.

Unlike their Vietnamese and French counterparts, few Khmer nationalists before World War II were willing to speak of 'Indochina for the Indochinese', let alone Indochinese citizenship. As Khemarak Bottra put it: 'As for France, it's always the same for Her; She's always for the I.U. [Indochinese Union]'.⁶⁵ Not him. In 1937, in what would have shocked French colonial republicans as heresy, Khemeravanich called for the deconstruction of the French Indochinese colonial state in favour of creating a separate Khmer colonial state closer in line with the Cambodian national form he had in mind. It was this smaller territorial space, located outside of French Indochina, which would serve as the basis of a new Cambodian nationality of an assimilationist kind:

The institution known as the Indochinese Union, the equivalent in fact of the annexation of Cambodia by the Annamese, is bad for our national future. If, in effect, the Annamese countries and our own belonged to different masters, for example the former to the Netherlands and us to the French – our frontier in the East would have survived and the Annamese would not be able to stride across it without having to deal with endless passport formalities. I have the firm conviction that the generous French people will not let such a situation continue for long in Cambodia, something which they would have never allowed in France. If not, then [France] will have to answer before History. Those who hold the levers of power should put themselves in our shoes in order to govern us. They should make an *effort to Khmerize here all Asians who are not Khmers*, which is about one third of the population! In short, the French should give us at least the semblance of a having a national government.⁶⁶

The problem of course was that the colonial state was territorially Indochinese; Cambodia was but a subgroup. In a fascinating twist, however, several Cambodians came up with a solution they found elsewhere in colonial Southeast Asia. On 2 September 1937, 'I.K.' asked the French to detach Cambodia from French Indochina, to administer it as a separate colonial entity, just as the British had done in India when they created a separate colonial Burma (in part because of Burmese hostility to growing numbers of Indians working within the colonial state). Cambodia, like Burma, would remain a French colony, but it would adopt an inclusive nationality transforming the

⁶⁵ Khémarak Bottra, 'Cambodge aux cambodgiens et cambodgiens pour le Cambodge', p. 6. One French official reported to Paris that the creation of a *Dominion indochinoise* would not work because 'there is not yet common Indochinese aspirations'. 'Note d'ensemble sur les problèmes évoqués par les vux politiques', p. 27, in box BK.IV, Guernut Commission, CAOM.

⁶⁶ 'L'éternelle question' in *L'Annam Nouveau*, No. 677 (15 August 1937), p. 1, which had first appeared in the *Presse Indochinoise*, as a response to Chu Ha.

Vietnamese into ‘Cambodians’. The reality of colonial Indochina was clearly already in trouble ‘down below’, among the colonized, before the Japanese brought down the colonial edifice in March 1945.⁶⁷

As in the Sino-Vietnamese controversy, this Cambodian-Vietnamese exchange brought the colonizer into the picture. In November 1937, the *Résident supérieur* himself, Mr. Thibaudeau, called on the Khmer elites to take their destiny into their own hands, and to put Cambodia on the road to ‘progress’. If ‘Cambodia was to be for the Cambodians’, he retorted, then the Khmers had to work harder. Yes, he responded, the Vietnamese had long dominated civil servant posts, but it was because Khmer youths had not shared the Vietnamese enthusiasm for working in the colonial bureaucracy in western Indochina.⁶⁸ The protectorate had had no choice but to rely on others while waiting for the Khmer elite to take up the challenge.

Mr. Marinetti, the delegate for Cambodia to the Ministry of the Colonies, a man who considered himself ‘more Khmer than the Khmer themselves’, also opposed these Cambodian calls for ‘separatism’. The British may have detached Burma from British India, he said, but it was unthinkable for the French to do so. Colonial or not, separatism was unthinkable. The bottom line, as he commented on the Vietnamese-Cambodian debates, was that ‘in Cambodia, we live under French law’, meaning that colonial Indochina took precedence over Cambodia in territorial terms. While he did not say it, he was implicitly calling on the Khmers to be good little ‘Indochinese citizens’ instead of secessionist-minded Cambodian nationalists. However, he forgot to mention that there was still no such thing as a legally constituted definition of ‘Indochinese citizenship’ for turning those living within the borders of colonial Indochina into ‘Indochinese’.⁶⁹

The Cambodians were not impressed by the French arguments. In a remarkable extension of the debate, Khemeravanich responded directly to the colonizer, Mr. Marinetti, via the press. He criticized this French defender of Cambodia publicly by saying that if he were really ‘more Khmer than the Khmer’, then he should logically try to change French laws detrimental to the Cambodians. Speaking

⁶⁷ I.K., ‘Réponse à l’aimable M. Vu Dinh Da: L’immigration annamite au Cambodge’ in *La Presse Indochinoise* (2 September 1937), p. 4.

⁶⁸ Khy Phanra, *La communauté vietnamienne au Cambodge*, pp. 234–236.

⁶⁹ Marinetti, ‘Le problème irritant de l’immigration annamite’ in *L’Annam Nouveau*, No. 692 (7 October 1937), p. 1.

ironically, he called on this French friend of Cambodia, as Cambodia's representative to the Ministry of Colonies, to support Khmer nationalist aspirations or, implicitly, to resign: 'Is it not the duty of the administration to help them [the Cambodians] to stand up since they admit that they are unable to do it themselves? It is a request which we send to the government'.⁷⁰ Khemarak Bottha was even blunter: 'And as long as [France] does not change its current, disastrous Indochinese regime to which it forces our Kampuchea to join, how can France deserve the title of protector of the Khmer, tell me? ...'.⁷¹

It appears that this friend of Cambodia, Mr. Marinetti, woke up to Khmer calls for change. Around 1938, still as a member of the *Conseil supérieur de la France d'Outre-mer*, he sent a report to the Ministry of the Colonies, arguing that the French had to respond to the needs of all the Indochinese, and not just those of the Vietnamese. This was a significant change in tack. Marinetti asked the government to reserve administrative posts for Khmer elites, and, in a major *volte-face*, he solicited a greater degree of political and economic 'autonomy' for Cambodia within the Indochinese edifice. He concluded that these 'reasonable demands' were needed and that it would be 'unforgivable not to implement them'. Colonial alliances could clearly change.

The Vietnamese editors of *La Tribune Indigène* were stunned by this shift in colonial alliances, shocked that Marinetti, a French colonial administrator, could make such a concession to Cambodian nationalists. The Vietnamese feared that the French government might just pursue some of his suggestions. To them, Marinetti's recommendation of increased autonomy for Cambodia within French Indochina smacked of 'separatism'. In such a scenario, what would happen to their 'nationals', if Cambodia were to attain increased legal autonomy vis-à-vis the rest of Indochina. *La Tribune Indochinoise*, the mouthpiece of southern Cochinchinese elites, replied that rather than going towards a break up of the colonial state along national lines, it was essential to move towards the creation of a more inclusive Indochinese identity.⁷² *La Tribune Indochinoise* asked why the Cambodians were talking of quitting Indochina when the French

⁷⁰ Khemaravanik, 'Le problème annamite au Cambodge' in *L'Annam Nouveau*, No. 693 (10 October 1937), p. 4.

⁷¹ Khemarak Bottra, 'Cambodge aux Cambodgiens', p. 6.

⁷² Khy Phanra, *La communauté vietnamienne au Cambodge*, p. 234 and 'L'autonomie cambodgienne?' in *La Tribune Indigène*, No. 1746 (10 August 1938), p. 1, 4.

were trying to turn the Federation into a reality: ‘But why evoke such an eventuality, when for ages French policy has precisely tried to turn the Indochinese Union into a homogenous and harmonious federation in all its connections?’⁷³ Fearful that the French would cede to Cambodian demands for increased autonomy, these Vietnamese focused their sights on the French Indochinese model as the best way to protect their ‘nationals’ in Laos and Cambodia from potential ‘khmerisation’, ‘laoification’ or expulsion as we saw above. As one Vietnamese responded to Khemeravanich’s separatist arguments: ‘It is necessary to think of Indochina as a great family whose members must love one another, protect each other, help each other and support one another mutually’.⁷⁴ Bui Quang Chieu, one of their leading spokesmen, had already spoken in 1931 of the need to create an ‘Indochinese citizenship’ in order to hold Indochina together.⁷⁵ It was the same Bui Quang Chieu who led the charge against the special colonial privileges of the Chinese in Cochinchina after World War I (see above).

As this debate shows, colonial legal categories clearly transformed relations among ‘Indochinese’ elites during the colonial period. These categories were contested, resented, and often rejected, but they were also coveted and pushed by the colonized depending on where one was residing in colonial Indochina. These categories contributed directly to how the ‘colonized’ saw themselves in relation to the colonizer *and* in relation to other colonized ‘Asian’ groups living in the colonial state. As Bui Quang Chieu’s case shows, one could demand the nationalisation of the Chinese on the one hand, while simultaneously defending a special colonial status for Vietnamese subjects in Cambodia, if not the creation of Indochinese colonial citizenship. Again, the colonial encounter was not static and those “colonized–colonized” relationships can even shed new light on the post-colonial nation-states and the issues dividing them from 1945. The prickly question of modern nationality, for example, clearly began during the colonial period, as our last debate demonstrates nicely.

⁷³ ‘Une thèse étrange de M. Marinetti: L’autonomie cambodgienne ?’ in *La Tribune Indochinoise*, No. 1746 (10 August 1938), pp. 1–2.

⁷⁴ La Xuan Choat, ‘À propos de la lettre de M. Khemeravanick’ in *La Presse Indochinoise*, No. 672 (29 July 1937), p. 3.

⁷⁵ Bui Quang Chieu, ‘Le statut du citoyen indochinois’, speech given in Saigon in 1931, cited in file Bc, box 23, Commission Guernut, CAOM.

The Failure of Indochinese Citizenship: The Decree of 31 May 1935 in Laos

In 1935, the French set off a veritable Indochinese-wide debate, when they approved an assimilationist definition of nationality for the colonial territory of Laos. In so doing, they paradoxically, if disingenuously called into question the reality of French Indochina as a viable territorial framework and corresponding nationality. On 31 May 1935, Louis Marty, the former head of the Indochinese Sûreté now stationed to Laos, signed into law a decree that changed in the stroke of a pen the legal status of ethnic Vietnamese living in Laos. This law effectively placed ethnic Vietnamese/Annamese⁷⁶ villages and their headmen under the legal supervision of Lao authorities (*chau muong*). Unlike the Chinese congregations in eastern Indochina, the Vietnamese in Laos could no longer legally bypass the local Lao authorities to deal directly with the French colonial authorities (though they continued to do so). Theoretically, the Vietnamese chief had to interact both with the French *Résident supérieur* and the Lao *naiban* and/or *tasseng*, who determined who would be chief of the Vietnamese groupings.⁷⁷

Outraged, Vietnamese nationalists across Indochina argued that such a legal change could potentially exclude Vietnamese emigrants from Laos, whereas the subordination of the Vietnamese living in Laos to Lao authorities could transform these ethnic Vietnamese colonial subjects into Lao nationals! Numerous Vietnamese went straight to local libraries to check out the French legal texts, again . . . They came back with revealing arguments. For one, some said, French law as laid down in the 1884 treaty held that, as French *protégés* and *sujets*, ‘the Annamese abroad will be placed under the French protectorate’. Therefore, they could not be subjected to ‘foreign’ Lao authority. Those Vietnamese residing or working in Laos were thus under

⁷⁶ As the legal language put it: “tout sujet ou protégé français indochinois, originaires d’un autre pays de l’Union que le Laos”.

⁷⁷ ‘Arrêté’, Vietnaine, 31 May 1935, signed Louis Marty, file 2398 (2), box 271, Nouveau Fonds, CAOM and Pham Huy Luc, ‘Le statut politique des Annamites au Laos’ in *La Tribune Républicaine*, No. 13 (1 March 1936), p. 6. Children born in Laos of an ‘Indochinese mother and father who are not Lao’ would not be required to obtain an identity card on obtaining major status. While it was not stated explicitly, it appears that they would be considered as Laotian colonial nationals.

French legal authority, not that of the Lao.⁷⁸ Inversely, if a protected Lao subject could not be subordinated to Tonkinese or Annamese mandarins and nationalities, then how could the ethnic Vietnamese *sujet protégé* be placed under local Lao control in Laos?⁷⁹ Or as another argument ran, the French had to protect the Vietnamese protected subjects from ‘nationalisation’, even from within the Indochinese colonial state!

From its position, by establishing its tutorship over our country, France assumed the task of protecting Annam and its nationals both on the inside and the outside [outside ‘Annam’ or ‘Indochina’?]. However, it was never a question for France to delegate her authority to a third power above all when this power is Laos, that is, a country which, until a recent past, was a tributary of our country.⁸⁰

When the Popular Front’s Guernut commission arrived in Laos in 1937, charged with making a study of the situation in Indochina, the Vietnamese president of the *Association mutuelle et sportive des Annamites* petitioned the French to elaborate a new legal status for the ethnic Vietnamese in Laos so that they did not have to become Laotian nationals. He specifically asked for the abrogation of the May 1935 decree, which had established the ‘arbitrary pre-eminence of the indigenous’, that is the ‘Laotian’, over the Vietnamese in Laos. Because of their modernising role in developing Laos, this representative felt that the Vietnamese deserved a special legal status. The French *Résident supérieur* did not think so, explaining to the Ministry of the Colonies the importance of the 1935 decision:

This [Vietnamese] petition, inspired by questions [of pride, I would even say a racial consideration (quite strange to find in an element that complains precisely of being subject to ‘racial prejudice’), is unfounded. It is normal that, living in the Laotian country, the Annamese immigrants are subject to the control of the authorities of this country. In practice, this text has not been applied, at least not in the province of Vientiane or in Luang Prabang where the *tong truong* works directly with the Residence. At the most, one could allow the Annamese in Laos located in urban centres to interact directly with the Residents concerning their affairs, but they should [nonetheless] not

⁷⁸ Nam Dan, ‘Sous la couple des autorités laotiennes’ in *La Gazette de Hue*, No. 40 (29 November 1936), p. 1, 3.

⁷⁹ Pham Huy Luc, ‘Le statut politique des Annamites au Laos’ in *La Tribune Républicaine*, No. 13 (1 March 1936), p. 7.

⁸⁰ Nam Dan, ‘Sous la couple des autorités laotiennes’ in *La Gazette de Hue*, No. 40 (29 November 1936), p. 3.

be exonerated from the indispensable control of the indigenous [Laotian] authorities.⁸¹

The *Résident supérieur's* argument that it was 'normal' that those living in Laos were subordinated to indigenous, Lao authorities no doubt thrilled Lao nationalists like Phetsarath and his counterparts in Cambodia seeking nationalist assimilation. However, it also set a major legal precedent that ran against a wider Indochinese legal identity. In fact, it legally opened the way for the assimilation of other Asian groups located elsewhere in the Indochinese Union.⁸² The 1935 decree was a landmark in identity making in colonial Indochina, for it laid the legal foundations for defining and constituting membership along national lines. All of this was occurring during the colonial period.

Vietnamese elites were shocked, seeing themselves on the nationalist losing end of these new colonial legal decisions. And in certain ways, they were. After all, 'Vietnam' remained divided into three legally distinct entities and nationalities. To my knowledge, the French had no intention of unifying Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina into one single territorial entity and citizenship.⁸³ To make matters worse, Republican Chinese nationalists had successfully negotiated an international treaty with the French by which many Chinese and mixed bloods (*ming huong*) living in Indochina would be considered as Chinese 'nationals', and not as 'Cochinchinese' or 'Indochinese'. In a revealing objection, in late 1935, a Vietnamese writer, Nam Dan, wrote acerbically:

At the time when the Chinese immigrants residing in Annam [meaning all three Vietnamese *pays*] benefit from a favourable [legal] system developed by the new Franco-Chinese convention and see themselves promoted to the ranks of privileged foreigners [like the Japanese], it is to say the least strange that the Annamese immigrants in Laos are held to such a strict legal ruling and become there [in Laos] diminished nationals (*ressortissants*).⁸⁴

⁸¹ 'Résidence supérieure au Laos, 2B, no. 52BP/AG, Vientiane, 21 December 1937, p. 2, file BC, box 23, Commission Guernut, CAOM.

⁸² In 1939, under Khmer nationalist pressure, the *Résident supérieur* limited eligibility for the exam for secretaries in his *Résidence* to Cambodian candidates and 'sujet français' born in Cambodia. Khy Phanra, 'La communauté vietnamienne au Cambodge', p. 235.

⁸³ Was this because demands for such unity and citizenship were less vocal than those of the Khmer and the Lao? This question remains unclear.

⁸⁴ Nam Dan, 'Pour une amélioration de leur statut politique' in *La Gazette de Hue*, No. 41 (6 December 1935), p. 1.

It was a good point. The problem was that the Vietnamese were part of a colonial state. In the end, the French defined the categories, not the Vietnamese. If the Vietnamese hoped to prevent the potential nationalisation of their compatriots into Lao and Cambodian colonial nationals, the only other remaining alternative they had at their disposal was, again, to push for the creation of an Indochinese federal state in which they would constitute the majority and a wider, inclusive Indochinese citizenship would over-ride the contesting national ones. Bui Quang Chieu, the editor of *La Tribune Indochinoise* and one of the first to make this connection in 1931, was a fervent supporter of creating an Indochinese citizenship. Less than a year after the application of the 1935 decree on Laos, he argued in print that the political structures for building an Indochinese identity were already in place: 'In the *Grand Conseil de l'Indochine*', he said, 'Lao members mingle fraternally with those of Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina. Even better, these representatives of Laos and Cambodia merge very often their votes with those of the Annamese on a number of questions . . .'⁸⁵ He categorically opposed the 1935 Lao decree, knowing full well that it set a precedent for the legal break up of Indochina right down the middle. In February 1936, he returned to the Indochinese idea, saying that while he understood the French desire to slow 'Annamese expansion' westwards, he countered that this immigration was only natural since the Vietnamese played the major role in the policy of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration and in the modernisation of the colony. He warned implicitly, however, that the 1935 decision, if maintained, would mean that the 'Indochinese Union is nothing but a vain formula'. What he could have added was that of 1936 there was still no such thing as a coherent, inclusive French Indochinese colonial state or citizenship.⁸⁶

For anyone paying attention to these debates, it was clear that the idea of realising an inclusive French Indochinese identity was already in trouble by the start of World War II. Vichy's Admiral Jean Decoux's attempt to save Indochina from melting down in the face of foreign threats only confirmed the fiction of Indochina. On the one hand, he loosened the colonial brakes on local patriotisms (along Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian lines) to maintain their support,

⁸⁵ Bui Quang Chieu, 'Les annamites au Laos' in *La Tribune Indochinoise*, No. 1378 (5 January 1936), p. 1.

⁸⁶ Bui Quang Chieu, 'L'expansion annamite en Indochine' in *La Tribune Indochinoise*, No. 1391 (17 February 1936), p. 1.

while on the other hand, he tried to transform the heterogeneous Indochinese Union into a real and inclusive Indochinese identity via the announcement of an Indochinese Federation. But it was too little and too late: Competing national identities in Laos and especially Cambodia were already in the making; and Vichy's national policies only fuelled things along already emerging non-Indochinese lines. To my knowledge, no colonized ever carried papers during the Vichy period referring to him or her as a legally constituted 'Indochinese citizen' or 'subject'. It is not even sure that an Indochinese Federation ever existed before 1945. Vichy's attempt to assimilate the diverse ethnic populations in Indochina into one wider identity was too little, too late, contradictory; and largely ignored longstanding (and well-known) Lao and Khmer nationalist objections to the political reality of Indochina and hostility towards Vietnamese immigration (see above).⁸⁷ In short, French colonial legal categories had divided and been contested down below by the colonized for far too long.

And yet, the French returned in late 1945 determined to create an Indochinese Federation and citizenship. Not only did they encounter Vietnamese nationalists determined to unify Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin into one national entity, but they were also caught off guard by Lao and Khmer objections to all that was Indochinese, shocked to learn in 1946 that the Cambodian King was favourable to separating Cambodia from French Indochina.⁸⁸ And yet, there was nothing new about this proposal (see above). But to the French colonial mind, Cambodia's political separation from Indochina was as unthinkable as the unified Vietnamese nation-state being pushed by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. It would take four more years,

⁸⁷ In 1939 and 1940, convinced finally that the Khmer elites and their political aspirations had to be taken seriously, *Résident Supérieur* Thibeaudeau informed Governor Generals Catroux and Decoux of Khmer demands of a non-Indochinese kind. However, like the French negotiators of 1945 and 1946, Decoux could not accept Khmer objections to the political reality of colonial Indochina, let alone its potential break up along national lines as the Thais resumed their efforts to deconstruct French Indochina from the west. Decoux rejected these proposals in 1940. Khy Phanra, *La communauté vietnamienne au Cambodge*, p. 237. Regardless of Lao-Khmer opposition, the Indochinese colonial model had to take precedent. The result was a collection of fanciful Vichy fictions, such as Ourot Souvannavong, 'Les Annamites et nous' in *Indochine*, No. 57 (October 1941), pp. 3–5 and dreams of a new Indochinese civilization joined together by the French. See, Tan Nam Tu, 'Civilisation indochinoise' in *Indochine*, No. 42 (25 June 1942), pp. 1–5.

⁸⁸ Commission d'Études franco-khmère, séance du 6 décembre 1945, 3^{ème} séance, file Cambodge, Modus vivendi et constitution, box 1K306, Papiers Alessandri, Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes, France.

a war with the Vietnamese, the arrival of the Cold War and the Lao and Khmer rejection of all that was Indochinese before the French were finally forced to create Associated States along national lines with corresponding nationalities.⁸⁹

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a few general remarks as to why inter-Asian colonial exchanges might be worth studying. First, the modernising and categorising nature of the colonial project itself actually accelerated interactions among the different Asian colonized. New legal identities accorded by the European colonial states to the Indians, Chinese and Vietnamese for a variety of different reasons brought about new exchanges, many of which would become points of national and international contention once decolonisation transformed the colonial states into national ones.

Second, if post-colonial studies have focused on the ‘colonizer’ and the ‘colonized’, these debates on colonial legal categories, for example, point up the rich sources and theoretical possibilities for studying what went on among the colonized themselves during the colonial period and their relationships with the colonizer from a different vantage point. Many of these debates are in the press, which served as the ‘unofficial’ archives of the colonized, one of the rare places they could engage each other. It seems likely that similar debates and sources could be located in other parts of colonial Asia, such as in the Indonesia/Dutch Indies and the former British Asian Empire: Burma, Malaya, Singapore and India. The possibility for wider comparisons is tantalising, ones which cut horizontally among the ‘colonized’ and vertically between the ‘colonizer’ and the ‘colonized’.

Third, these debates on legal categories and economic nationalism point up the fact that the 1945 break between the ‘colonial period’ and the ‘post-colonial period’ may not be as sharp as we have been led to believe in colonial and international studies. These three exchanges demonstrate the extent to which the modern concept of nationality had already begun to make itself felt during the colonial

⁸⁹ See the French colonial correspondence on ‘naturalizations’ in Laos in 1948 in folder 17, archival grouping Conseiller Politique, CAOM. See also, Khy Phanra, *La communauté vietnamienne au Cambodge*, pp. 411–416 on the transfer of sovereignty to the Cambodians and its impact on immigration laws.

period. Again, I would think there would be similar inter-Asian, inter-colonial debates on legal categories and colonial citizenship among the Indonesians and Chinese or the Burmese and the Indians, all of which would have involved the Dutch and the British. There is certainly a parallel between the colonial separation of Burma from the larger British Colonial State of India and the Cambodian plea to be separated from the French Indochinese state. It would be equally rewarding, I think, to compare the emergence of anti-Chinese sentiments among nationalists in various Southeast Asian colonial states, including Thailand.⁹⁰

Fourth, French colonial legal categories in Indochina, perhaps like those of the Dutch and the British, created racial, political and cultural divides. This, in turn, triggered the desire to 'nationalize' certain groups or to exclude them. The study of these categories in particular and law in general may allow us to go further in understanding the construction of social barriers, mutual perceptions, cultural constructions of the other and the mechanics of ethnic violence. In the Empire, European legal categories, unlike their national types in Europe, created 'Others'. As the national idea rapidly developed in the minds of the colonized, privileged groups, the Chinese in Vietnam and the Vietnamese in Cambodia and Laos, found themselves *outside* of the national community or at its nationalising mercy. These questions deserve more critical study and in a wider comparative context. For these three debates strongly suggest that the colonial period was no 'black hole' in relationships among the Asian colonized. Many of the arguments developed in the 1920s and 1930s would be applied, sometimes violently, as nation states worked themselves out after World War II.

Lastly, these debates perhaps suggest that it is time to move beyond the binary opposition in colonial and post-colonial studies opposing the 'colonizer' and the 'colonized'. The possibility of developing an analytical framework cutting horizontally among the colonized and vertically between the colonizer and the colonized would be an exciting prospect. And I think it's vital to keep the colonizer in the analytical picture to show how the French, Dutch or British, or even European settlers, could ally themselves in unexpected ways with the colonized, depending on the interest involved, the time and the place. In this way, a future history of the 'colonial encounter' in Southeast Asia would be

⁹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 13.

less of an oppositional or Eurocentric one than a ‘connected history’ to borrow Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s term.⁹¹ However, in order to see the complexity of the colonial encounter, we need to reconfigure how we approach it. This essay has simply tried to suggest a few new ways of looking at an old problem.

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⁹¹ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Connected histories: Notes towards a reconfiguration of early modern Eurasia’ in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (July 1997), pp. 735–762. On that note, it is worth recalling that different Asian groups were not always engaging each other in oppositional terms, as this essay would perhaps have us believe. Indeed, they were connecting in a myriad of non-confrontational ways – playing on the same football teams, going to church together, intermarrying, and fighting wars. But this is another story, a connected one, which I would like to take up elsewhere.

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