Emerging from the Shadow of China

Indo-China comprises the modern countries of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (see Fig. 1). Its early history shows many different groups of people living in this area under the shadow of the powerful empire of China. Even when an independent country was established in what is now northern and central Vietnam, its rulers continued to maintain the Chinese system of government as well as Chinese culture.

Vietnam was also linked to what has been called the maritime silk route that brought in goods, people and ideas. Other networks of trade connected it to the hinterlands where non-Vietnamese people such as the Khmer Cambodians lived.

1.1 Colonial Domination and Resistance

The colonisation of Vietnam by the French brought the people of the country into conflict with the colonisers in all areas of life. The most visible form of French control was military and economic domination but the French also built a system that tried to reshape the culture of the Vietnamese. Nationalism in Vietnam emerged through the efforts of different sections of society to fight against the French and all they represented.
French troops landed in Vietnam in 1858 and by the mid-1880s they had established a firm grip over the northern region. After the Franco-Chinese war the French assumed control of Tonkin and Anaam and, in 1887, French Indo-China was formed. In the following decades the French sought to consolidate their position, and people in Vietnam began reflecting on the nature of the loss that Vietnam was suffering. Nationalist resistance developed out of this reflection.

Fig. 3 – Francis Garnier, a French officer who led an attack against the ruling Nguyen dynasty, being killed by soldiers of the court. Garnier was part of the French team that explored the Mekong river. In 1873 he was commissioned by the French to try and establish a French colony in Tonkin in the north. Garnier carried out an attack on Hanoi, the capital of Tonkin, but was killed in the fight.

Fig. 4 – The Mekong river, engraving by the French Exploratory Force, in which Garnier participated. Exploring and mapping rivers was part of the colonial enterprise everywhere in the world. Colonisers wanted to know the route of the rivers, their origin, and the terrain they passed through. The rivers could then be properly used for trade and transport. During these explorations innumerable pictures and maps were produced.
The famous blind poet Nguyen Dinh Chieu (1822-88) bemoaned what was happening to his country:

I would rather face eternal darkness
Than see the faces of traitors.
I would rather see no man
Than encounter one man’s suffering.
I would rather see nothing
Than witness the dismembering of the country in decline.

1.2 Why the French thought Colonies Necessary

Colonies were considered essential to supply natural resources and other essential goods. Like other Western nations, France also thought it was the mission of the ‘advanced’ European countries to bring the benefits of civilisation to backward peoples.

The French began by building canals and draining lands in the Mekong delta to increase cultivation. The vast system of irrigation works – canals and earthworks – built mainly with forced labour, increased rice production and allowed the export of rice to the international market. The area under rice cultivation went up from 274,000 hectares in 1873 to 1.1 million hectares in 1900 and 2.2 million in 1930. Vietnam exported two-thirds of its rice production and by 1931 had become the third largest exporter of rice in the world.

This was followed by infrastructure projects to help transport goods for trade, move military garrisons and control the entire region. Construction of a trans-Indo-China rail network that would link the northern and southern parts of Vietnam and China was begun. This final link with Yunan in China was completed by 1910. The second line was also built, linking Vietnam to Siam (as Thailand was then called), via the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh.

By the 1920s, to ensure higher levels of profit for their businesses, French business interests were pressurising the government in Vietnam to develop the infrastructure further.

1.3 Should Colonies be Developed?

Everyone agreed that colonies had to serve the interests of the mother country. But the question was – how? Some like Paul Bernard, an influential writer and policy-maker, strongly believed that the
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The economy of the colonies needed to be developed. He argued that the purpose of acquiring colonies was to make profits. If the economy was developed and the standard of living of the people improved, they would buy more goods. The market would consequently expand, leading to better profits for French business.

Bernard suggested that there were several barriers to economic growth in Vietnam: high population levels, low agricultural productivity and extensive indebtedness amongst the peasants. To reduce rural poverty and increase agricultural productivity it was necessary to carry out land reforms as the Japanese had done in the 1890s. However, this could not ensure sufficient employment. As the experience of Japan showed, industrialisation would be essential to create more jobs.

The colonial economy in Vietnam was, however, primarily based on rice cultivation and rubber plantations owned by the French and a small Vietnamese elite. Rail and port facilities were set up to service this sector. **Indentured** Vietnamese labour was widely used in the rubber plantations. The French, contrary to what Bernard would have liked, did little to industrialise the economy. In the rural areas landlordism spread and the standard of living declined.

**Indentured labour** – A form of labour widely used in the plantations from the mid-nineteenth century. Labourers worked on the basis of contracts that did not specify any rights of labourers but gave immense power to employers. Employers could bring criminal charges against labourers and punish and jail them for non-fulfilment of contracts.

*Fig. 5 – A French weapons merchant, Jean Dupuis, in Vietnam in the late nineteenth century.*

*Many like him explored the regions in the hope of making profits from trade. He was one of those who persuaded the French to try and establish a base in Vietnam.*