1 Property and poverty in southern Vietnam

Colonial and postcolonial perspectives

David Biggs

From the first anti-colonial movements in the 1860s through the Indochina Wars to the present, land rights, landlessness, and poverty have figured centrally in Vietnamese politics. Despite wars, the 1945 revolution, and several instances of sweeping land reform, the present-day contests over land rights retain a distinct historical character. Much has been written by Vietnamese and foreign authors about the economic and political dimensions of rural poverty in southern Vietnam; however, these analyses tend to be situated within the temporal bounds of colonial (1860–1954), postcolonial (1954–), postwar (1975–) or post-Doi Moi (1986–) frameworks. Little of this research has considered a broader issue: the ways in which older framings of rural problems have shaped more contemporary views. This essay examines the particular circumstances in which certain discussions of the landless, commonly referred to as *ta dien* (tenant farmers), and what colonial authors called the *malaise agricole* (agricultural slump), were framed for the reading public and decision-makers.

Discussions about tenant farmers and property reform appeared within two different public spheres, one associated with newspapers read by a large cross-section of Vietnamese and colonial society and the other a more restricted, academic sphere shaped by the contributions of a small group of French and Vietnamese social scientists who began studying rural poverty in the late 1920s and into the 1930s.

The media outlets for early writing about rural problems in the south, especially newspapers in the 1920s, played an important role in codifying language about southern poverty and property conflicts. Their depictions were deeply inscribed by differing political and financial concerns; and some views appeared routinely in mainstream media while others were relegated to underground, radical, and overseas venues. As Philippe Peycam, Peter Zinoman, Shawn McHale and others have argued, the newspapers that circulated on the streets of Hanoi and Saigon in the 1930s supported multiple articulations of modern Vietnamese political consciousness. Saigon newspapers played an important role in documenting conditions in the southern countryside and bringing them to national attention. With the fall of the Popular Front in 1938 and the arrival of the Vichy government in 1940, more
radical Vietnamese writers in the south went underground; nevertheless, they continued to expound on the “rural malaise” in such works as Phi Van’s documentary novel *The Countryside (Dong Que)*, published in 1942.3

Although it, too, played a crucial role in shaping the ways in which state officials understood the causes of rural poverty and sought means to combat it, colonial social science as a field of study has received little scholarly attention. In the mid-1920s, a growing cohort of French and Vietnamese sociologists began paying close attention to the causes of land degradation and the worsening economic situation of tenant farmers. With the worsening state of agriculture in Vietnam after 1930, scholars such as the French geographer Pierre Gourou played a prominent role in shaping the conceptual frameworks for thinking about possible solutions to the problems of landlessness and rural poverty.4 Gourou, Yves Henry5 and Nguyen Van Huyen6 mobilized such tools of statecraft as demographic and economic data, aerial photography, and thick ethnographic description to present a more formalized image of tenant farmers and more systematic views of Vietnamese rural landscapes. Casual discussions with Vietnamese social scientists today reveal that many still look to these works as models for contemporary research and policy.

**Reporting rural poverty and property conflicts**

With some notable exceptions, news about extreme rural poverty in Cochinchina did not reach audiences in Vietnamese cities until the mid-1920s. This was largely the result of intense government censorship of native writers and Vietnamese-language newspapers, but it was also due to evolving political arrangements among Vietnam’s educated and urban-based elites. One exception in 1907 was Gilbert Tran Chanh Chieu. A retired colonial civil servant and wealthy landowner from Rach Gia, Tran Chanh Chieu took on the editorship of *Nong Co Min Dam (Agricultural Forum)*, a popular Vietnamese-language newspaper founded in 1901 that addressed agricultural issues from a planter’s perspective. As the newspaper’s editor in 1907 and 1908, Tran Chanh Chieu took a more critical view of the colonial government’s policies in rural areas. One essay, for example, highlighted conflicts occurring on the new network of canals being dredged to open vast areas of farmland to huge industrial estates. “An Interesting Battle” (Une bataille intéressante) criticized the poor planning of canals in his native province for exacerbating floods and causing the inundation of many native-owned farms.7 Tran Chanh Chieu’s critical voice in the press, however, was silenced in 1908 when the colonial government uncovered his key role as one of Cochinchina’s leading supporters of a southern variant of the Modernization movement (Duy Tan Hoi) led by the exiled scholar Phan Boi Chau and Prince Cuong De. This southern variant, called Minh Tan (New Light), followed ideas similar to Phan Boi Chau’s that were in turn shaped by Meiji reforms in Japan and the Self-Strengthening movement in China.8 The New Light campaign differed from the northern Modernization movement in that, instead of calling for the adoption of the Romanized script (largely a fait accompli in Cochinchina), it advocated economic independence from ethnic-Chinese firms that controlled many everyday transactions in the countryside as well as colonial tax farms (régies) in Cho Lon.9

It was during a second expansion of Vietnamese newspaper publishing from 1917 to 1928 that several prominent Saigon writers began to highlight severe disparities in landholdings and livelihood in the countryside. This burst of new publishing occurred in the aftermath of World War I when southern Vietnamese who had served the colonial government and helped raise funds to support the French war effort received support to establish new national newspapers such as *La Tribune Indigène (Native Tribune)* in 1917 and its Vietnamese-language counterpart *Quoc Dan Dien Don* in 1918. Bui Quang Chieu, one of the founding editors of *La Tribune Indigène*, came from working in the colonial Services Agricoles, and Le Quang Lien, later a prominent writer for the newspaper, had previously written essays encouraging Vietnamese support for the war bonds.10 Both were substantial landowners. As Hue-Tam Ho Tai notes, the Saigon elites who managed these moderate papers (compared with conservative, French-owned papers such as *Courrier Saigonnais*) devoted much of their energies to the question of expanding suffrage for the Vietnamese elite and the adoption of an Indochinese constitution (hence *Tribune Indigène*’s moniker as an “organ of the Constitutionalist Party”) rather than building a more popular, national coalition.11

In the 1920s, Saigon newspapers played an increasingly prominent role in shaping public sentiments about the rural poor, although until the documentary reporting (phong su) of the late 1920s, most stories of corrupt land dealings tended to fit within the more urban-centered critiques of corrupt colonial officials. The most radical views of rural injustices were typically relegated to overseas Vietnamese papers such as Nguyen Ai Quoc’s *Paria* to which others such as Nguyen An Ninh contributed. The younger generation of Vietnamese radicals such as Nguyen An Ninh, who wrote for *La Cloche Fêlée* (Cracked Bell) from 1923 to 1925, began to attract a new generation of urban Vietnamese youth to a more strident anti-colonial position. In the early 1920s, a variety of newspapers such as *Cloche Fêlée* and André Malraux’s *Indochine* took special aim at one of the most corrupt of Cochinchina’s governors, Maurice Cognacq, and his cronies. The first new articles about property and rural poverty concerned corrupt land seizures led by a Cognacq-backed consortium. The first of a series of articles appeared in *Indochine* on July 11, 1925 and was successful in halting the bizarre land auction of mostly cleared lands in Ca Mau that dispossessed the settlers of an estimated 26,000 hectares.12

A more documentary style (phong su) of writing on rural conditions commenced with a series of events in late 1925 and early 1926 that spurred a new wave of journalism in Saigon. Indochina’s first socialist governor-general, Alexander Varenne, took office in November 1925 and proceeded into his first scandal, the trial of Phan Boi Chau who had been arrested in South China a few months earlier. Varenne’s order that Chau be placed under house-arrest was followed by more protests in 1926 after the death of Phan Chu Trinh on March 24. Nguyen An Ninh was arrested on the same day (André Malraux, fearing for his and his wife’s safety, had already left Saigon). A new, more radical phase of publishing
The Great Depression triggered more bankruptcy in Cochin China, especially in rural areas, and it produced an economic crisis that catalyzed protests and spurred the colonial government to respond to the increasing problems of poverty and even land falling out of production. It was especially devastating for farmers in Cochin China. The price of Saigon No. 1 polished grain fell from a peak price of $13.10 piasters per 100 kg in 1929 to just $3.20 in 1934. All taxes and debts were paid in piasters, which meant rapid foreclosures and even famine for some. Aside from the problems faced by migrant workers and those duped by corrupt land auctions, many farmers who had previously owned their land now joined the landless tenant farmers. One estimate put this floating population at almost two-thirds of Cochin China's population.

While the Great Depression resulted in accelerated bankruptcies and more concentration of land into large holdings, consolidation into larger, industrialized estates had already been underway since the early 1920s. The devaluation of land after 1930 and the bankruptcy of many middle class landowners – including many French – led to shifts in the demographics of land ownership not only toward powerful French firms such as Gressier & Co. but also from French-born to native-born owners with French citizenship. This seemingly minor shift in estate ownership often had severe implications at the household level for tenants. In the Can Tho area, for example, elderly farmers who were in their teens at the time repeatedly told me about the problems that followed transfer of land from bankrupt Europeans to Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer landlords. Native-born landlords, they said, tended not to forgive tenant debts at the New Year and they denied tenants any rights to gather fish or glean unharvested rice. By 1930, some landlords such as Henry de la Chevrotière, a métis who inherited a large estate and led a very conservative political faction of landowners in Saigon, hired guards to protect the canals and fields and prevent hungry tenant farmers from “stealing” grain or “illegally” fishing.

The thirties have been seen largely as the decade of mass politics in Vietnam. But the emergence of mass political organizations and the expansion of the public sphere do not by themselves explain the more radical form that rural unrest took in that decade. Rather, a brief look at environmental and demographic changes in the late 1920s to early 1930s suggests that they coincided with economic and environmental collapses to create a perfect storm.

The majority of landless, rural poor lived in newly reclaimed floodplains rather than the rich alluvial strips (niet vuon) that had been inhabited by Khmers for centuries, followed by Chinese and Vietnamese. The colonial system of land rules that favored French citizens was aimed largely at claiming newly opened lands, and it produced often extreme conditions for tenants who settled in such reclaimed areas as the Plain of Reeds (Dong Thap) or the Transbassac (Hau Giang) (see Figure 1.1). Older, historic villages in the delta’s niet vuon regions were largely insulated from environmental and economic catastrophes as farmers had greater

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commenced when Bui Quang Chieu, who had gone to France a few months earlier, returned to Saigon and was elected as vice-chairman of the Colonial Council in October 1926. He used his new role in Saigon politics to build the newspaper to appeal to pro-reform and nationalist Vietnamese readers. In May 1927, La Tribune Indochinoise, the successor to Tribune Indigène, began publishing a documentary-style account by Lê Quang Liêm of the events that led to a violent massacre of villagers in Ninh Thanh Lôi (see Figure 1.2) by colonial troops. The governor played down the issue as a “scuffle” although two policemen, a Chinese businessman, and many villagers died in the fighting. The villagers, mostly illiterate, were not Vietnamese but Khmer. For nearly two decades, they had cleared the mangrove forest to establish the village after losing ancestral lands near Soc Trang, but had failed in their efforts to obtain titles to the land they had brought into cultivation. The conflict started when a wealthy Vietnamese official, Canton Chief Ngo, used aliases and connections to acquire over eleven thousand hectares of inhabited land in the region, swelling up Ninh Thanh Lôi. After gaining title to the land, he demanded that the villagers pay him rent. A village leader organized a protest with a local healer who prepared spells and amulets to protect them. The affair ended bloodily; villagers ended up killing an ethnic-Chinese business confidant of the canton chief. After two Vietnamese gendarmes died in the ensuing fighting, the colonial militia arrived and set fire to the village communal house (đình) killing over thirty men, women, and children trapped inside. The surrounding village was then abandoned.

In framing this confrontation for the Tribune Indochinoise’s audience, Liêm repeatedly argued that the cause of this violent and tragic encounter was not ethnic conflict but economic injustice and rampant corruption emanating from Saigon. More important was the way in which he described the farmers as tenant farmers. In fact, they had not been tenant farmers, i.e. renters on an estate, but land owners intent on becoming smallholders.

La Tribune Indochinoise conflated other groups into the category of tenant farmers, too. It published a serialized account in August 1927 describing the plight of thousands of “tenants” who were northern migrant workers who had boarded vessels in the north to find work on the colonial estates ranging from rubber in Phu Rieng to rice in the Transbassac. Bui Quang Chieu, now vice-chairman of the Colonial Council, presided over a new committee formed to investigate abuses of these workers, and his newspaper attacked the colonial estates for treating these tenant farmers worse than slaves. One article stated:

The owner of slaves had interest to spare his livestock, which represented a value; on the other hand, he who buys a Tonkinese for five years sees every year the value of his purchase decreasing by a fifth. He thus may find it beneficial to draw from this purchase in five years all that he can give.

To the end of the decade, exposés in the Saigon papers continued to emphasize rampant corruption with land transfers as well as a growing class of poor people in Cochin China generally (mis-)labeled as tenant farmers.
The movement spread out.” The ICP organized a series of tax protests in key village markets of the region and even granary raids in 1938 after a flood wiped out much of the rice crop.21 Trotskists, who competed with Communists in the South for leadership of the revolutionary movement, did not pay much heed to the plight of the tenant farmers. More committed than the Communists to the idea of a proletarian revolution, they preferred instead to document the lives of workers in cities and towns. Their newspaper, La Latte, featured numerous articles about conditions in the countryside but focused most of its attention on the struggles of village teachers (often members of the Trotskyist underground) and workers involved in industrial occupations such as laborers working for the dredging enterprise. A regular series in the newspaper, “The Life of Workers,” featured news snippets from the rural provinces of protests and strikes. In April and May 1938, the series featured accounts of a strike led by over 200 laborers employed in canal-dredging and drainage work by the Société des Dragages in My Tho Province. The strikes involved the enterprise’s refusal to raise wages and lasted for fifty-five days before the local director left the colony and returned to France.22

In the wake of the Great Depression and amidst escalating fear of general insurrections, the colonial government began searching for quick fixes to the problem of dispossessed peasants by relocating them into the relatively barren floodplain of the Long Xuyen Quadrangle (see Figure 1.2). Their motives for removing entire populations to the Quadrangle appear to have stemmed from interconnected political and economic concerns. It was simpler to move dispossessed farmers to new territory than to seize lands from powerful landlords with many allies in Saigon. Ethnic Khmer tenants from Ca Mau thus became the colony’s first targeted population for a resettlement scheme. The Office of Colonization that had previously sponsored transport of Tonkinese laborers to colonial estates now coordinated the sale of five-hectare plots of unclaimed land to each applicant family; and it located these plots along three newly completed canals in the western floodplain: Rach Gia–Ha Tien Canal, Tri Ton Canal, and Ba The Canals (see Figure 1.2). The new settlers, eager to gain legal title, quickly set up their houses and fields along the canals. Each household was required to put the land into production and pay taxes with rice (not piasters); there was a flood of applications that included many southern Vietnamese, Tonkinese migrants, and Khmers. By 1932, the provincial chief in Rach Gia worried that he could not control the “type of person” who staked a claim, and others worried that refugees would not possess a suitable “love of the land.”23 Settlement was uneven, and rapid deforestation coincided with intentionally set fires that spread over huge areas of cajeput (tea tree) forest and exposed highly acidic soils.

The Saigon papers, including the Tribune Indochnoise, attempted to forge a then-non-existent middle ground in appealing to tenant farmers while distancing themselves from the Communists. In an analysis of the 1938 granary raids, “La Révolte des ‘ta-dien’,” the paper described farmers as largely ignorant of ideology and “duped by agitators.” It sharply criticized the “Stalinists and Trotskyites” who threatened to induce fratricide among Vietnamese over ideological differences.
at a time when collaboration might yield significant improvements in the rural economy. Pleading the moderate case, the article suggested that the peasantry - largely illiterate and susceptible - would only suffer in the crossfire between radicals and government troops. La Tribune Indochinoise echoed similar proposals being advanced by the Popular Front government at the time. An investigation into the 1938 granary raids proposed stronger regulation of wage labor contracts and replacement of existing "pseudo-contracts" with a government-standardized salary for seasonal work across the region. By creating an agrarian proletariat (prolétaire agricole), it aimed not to turn tenant farmers into landholders but rather to protect them from usury.

Another legal political party, the Indochinese Democratic Party formed by Dr Nguyen Van Thinh, who later served as the first President of the Provisional Government of Cochinchina from June to November 1946, also contributed to the intellectual debate over landlessness. Like Bui Quang Chieu and other prominent Vietnamese at the time, Dr Thinh spent time in Paris where he completed a doctorate at the Pasteur Institute before returning to Cochinchina in 1926 and entering politics. In letters to newspapers and the governor, Dr Thinh urged further development of resettlement zones (casiers) and stronger support for agricultural worker contracts. Vietnamese moderates' emphasis on developing wage contracts and extending reclamation over land redistribution thus represented a fundamentally different approach to landlessness than that espoused by the ICP or the Trotskyists.

However, in attempting to solve the "ta dien problem" by turning tenants into farm workers, these reformers neglected the more pervasive effects of colonial land policies on the cultural and political life of Vietnamese villages. It was precisely in such villages as Vinh Thuan, An Bien, and Ninh Thanh Loi that ICP leaders built bases and formed secret party cells. In these villages, they focused their attention on all aspects of village life - economic, political, and cultural. The same villages later became safe havens for youths fleeing the French Sûreté or the Japanese Kempeitai in the 1940s; and ICP cadres used these villages to recruit followers. Contrasted with Saigon-based political parties and the Trotskyists, ICP activists approached property reform and poverty as issues deeply interconnected with problems of illiteracy and social justice.

This more intensive involvement in rural life, especially by urban-educated ICP activists, coincided with some of the most powerful works in the reportage (phong su) genre. Southern writers such as Phi Van (1917-77) produced some of the most famous reportage novels and short stories in the 1940s, examining the situation in the countryside from a more integrated economic, political, and cultural approach. A Bac Lieu native, Phi Van, wrote The Countryside (1942) as a vivid portrayal of corrupt officials such as Canton Chief Ngo destroying the fabric of rural family life, often denigrating rural women and traditional institutions in the process. Such works incited strong reactions especially among young readers, and they pointed to the moral indignities that often resulted from corrupt land transfers.

Engineering a solution to rural poverty

Although the Great Depression, the Nghe-Tinh Uprising, and the two-year reign of the Popular Front certainly contributed to widening public debate about the rural malaise and the situation of tenant farmers, it was only under the Vichy government and Japanese military occupation that the government attempted any large-scale land reforms. The state's delay in seeking action was due to several factors. First, rural protests led by the ICP continued until the aborted Southern Uprising in November 1940 that left most of the ICP's rural leadership in Cochinchina either dead, in prison, or hiding in remote areas such as Ca Mau. Second, the Japanese military command did not intervene in the day-to-day operations of the colony until March 1945, but it did place increasing demands on the governor-general to put every hectare of arable land into production to serve the Japanese war effort. Thus, it was feasible during the extreme conditions of wartime to send hundreds of thousands of Tonkinese south to reclaim new land.
Finally, land reform schemes that involved turning landless migrants into petits colons who would open up new lands and then reside in them permanently better served a Vichy ideology (Travail, Famille, Patrie) than a Communist one built largely around the empowerment of workers. Resettlement instead of redistribution also drew from an older, pre-colonial policy of sending the poor to open up new frontiers through the creation of military-agricultural settlements (don dien). The first big polder-style reclamation and resettlement scheme in the Long Xuyen Quadrangle, the casier tonkinois, was wholly in keeping with what Eric Jennings describes as the neo-traditional tendencies of Vichy. It embodied Vichy esthetics that blended extreme nationalism with an idealized notion of the national pastoral modeled on almost-mythical national landscapes such as the ancient rice terraces of the Red River Delta. This neo-traditional logic coincided with what James Scott would call the high modernist anchors of the state in such a rural area — school, health clinic, heavy machinery for hydraulic pumping, and at the center a sports stadium to coordinate youth athletics and group activities.29

From the 1930s and through World War II, colonial social scientists and technocrats played a powerful role in producing certain views of the delta countryside and its inhabitants that would shape rural policies and post-colonial attitudes for several decades. Not only did hydraulic engineers and others engage in full-scale social and environmental engineering with the first major casier schemes, but the growing ranks of geographers, agronomists, and even archeologists, most stranded in Indochina by the Pacific War, engaged in extensive rural-based research projects. For example, Louis Malleret, director of the Musée Blanchard de la Brosse (today the Ho Chi Minh City History Museum), conducted five years of surveys on Funan-Oc Eo Culture in the Long Xuyen Quadrangle.30 By 1940, a growing corpus of technical literature by geographers, demographers, and agricultural engineers had firmly established the terms that most technocrats used in succeeding decades to debate the causes of rural poverty and to remedying the "to dien problem." Academic studies of rural life extended beyond French academics to growing numbers of Vietnamese scholars. For example, Nguyen Van Huyen graduated with a PhD dissertation on stilt houses in 1933, and twelve years later he took over as director of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient. His published works, including La Civilisation Annamite (EFE, 1944), contributed to postcolonial Vietnamese notions of traditional rural life that still circulate widely today.31

Perhaps no other social scientist was as influential in shaping geographers’ and policymakers’ visions of a neo-traditional delta countryside as Pierre Gourou. His 1936 work, Les Paysans du Delta Tonkinois, gained him national and international fame for its detailed study of traditional patterns of soil and water management in the Tonkin delta based on extensive and meticulous field research as well as extensive use of aerial photography. His catalyzing new version of the "view over the village hedge" offered Vichy’s social engineers a model of family-based farms and densely parceled landholdings to be surrounded by village- or district-level flood control structures.32 With economic and environmental conditions worsening in the Mekong Delta’s floodplains during the late 1930s, Gourou’s followers turned their attention to explaining these failures and proposing solutions based on their research. Geographers and others adapted new technology with older forms such as census data to produce new cartographic tools, especially choropleth maps, that abstracted complex, interrelated social and economic data into easy-to-follow graphics. Gourou’s books and articles on rural society in Indochina aimed to present the Mekong Delta to urban and foreign readers in a different light. What had since the colonial conquest been presented in government reports and pamphlets as an industrial and agricultural “new frontier” was by the late 1940s being re-presented as a kind of Indo-Chinese or Vietnamese terroir, a landscape built out of the combination of natural resources and indigenous cultural traditions.33

Rather than assimilate rural people and the countryside into a modern, urbanizing, and French-centered state, this model argued for more separation between Vietnamese and French landscapes. Those masses formerly uprooted and cast adrift from their traditional culture and agriculture would be re-settled in the neo-traditional zones. With this new formulation of Vietnamese agriculture, Vichy’s social engineers went to work in the abandoned floodplains of the western Mekong Delta with the hope of stabilizing the region economically and politically. Gourou’s work also reinforced the idea of the polder or casier as a landscape form that merged water management with the containment of village life inside the dikes. Given the severe economic privations and costs involved in re-dredging canals, colonial engineers likely saw the fiscal advantage in this self-perpetuating model of flood control.

Considerations for polder schemes had been debated by a small circle of French and Vietnamese public works engineers since 1916, but they did not attract much public interest until the late 1930s when newspapers and reportage stories began to report more frequently on mounting political and economic troubles in the countryside.34 In order to improve crop yields, the government established in 1942 a rural engineering corps (génie rural). Why the Vichy government strove to build casiers instead of protecting the old grid of canals and the expansive plantations built along them was most likely due to the extreme dearth of dredging equipment associated with Japanese military occupation and the influence of social scientists such as Gourou. Even to keep old canals clear, the colony was forced to rely upon native contractors directing armies of manual laborers instead of the old public works monopoly that had dominated road, bridge, and canal construction since the 1890s.35 A 1944 map of the génie rural’s operations in Cochinchina shows each proposed research center. These sites continued to function as agricultural research stations after the First Indochina War, and they served as focal points for post-1954 irrigation and resettlement schemes (see Figure 1.3).

While he acted quickly to silence Vietnamese radical movements, Governor-General Decoux encouraged an active debate among his colonial technocrats over land reform. From the génie rural’s inception in 1942 to 1945, its members routinely criticized the powerful Department of Public Works for past mistakes, claiming that the dredging operations typically diminished agricultural yields for
Public Works engineers respond to these critiques by adopting the cause of *casiers* as a new approach to large-scale water engineering in the delta. They fire back at agricultural engineers for writing “pessimistic reports” that “all of Cochinchina is in danger.” They blamed the region’s irrigation problems and abandoned lands on uncoordinated local practices in newly opened regions. Unlike farmers in Tonkin, their reports argued that farmers in the Mekong Delta were effectively lazy, refusing to take individual responsibility for local-scale irrigation and instead waiting on the state to intervene.

These dueling interests were more or less reconciled in a 1942–5 program to resettle 750,000 northern Vietnamese into the *terres abandonées* (abandoned lands) of the Long Xuyen Quadrangle (see Figure 1.2). Under a new budget line, “Aid to Rice Farmers,” five million piasters would be raised to send Tonkinese peasants down the recently completed Trans-Indochinois Railway to populate the new *casiers*. The same budget category would fund the development of the *génie rural’s* research stations and a new round of studies by public works engineers on building a system of massive sea dikes, moving dams, and giant water pumping stations. As the Japanese war effort weakened, however, the project was scaled back to a budget of half a million piasters over four years. Nevertheless, Public Works engineers commenced building the first *casier tonkinois* for approximately seven thousand people due to arrive in mid-1943.

With the colony’s fleet of expensive dredging machines in disrepair owing to a lack of spare parts, the Public Works Department hired labor contractors to manage dredging the main canals by hand, and *Casier tonkinois I* opened in early 1944 when seven hundred fifty families moved there from Thai Binh and Nam Dinh. Upon arrival, the immigrants received new clothes, mosquito netting, raincoats and hats, blankets, and matting. They also received a five-hectare lot upon finishing required manual labor on interior canals, one month’s supply of food, cooking supplies, farming tools, and a small boat. Besides these personal amenities, the government built a primary school, a government field post, a market, and a communal house. A sports stadium was to be completed later in the year.

By the end of 1944, however, the farmers had cleared only one third of the land allotted them and many were suffering from severe water shortages. Unfamiliar with the local play of tides and the annual floods, they dug deep canals that drained floodwater outside the protective dikes; but once the rains ended they were unable to keep enough fresh water running in the canals. The government continued to spend 175,000 piasters into 1945 to provide sufficient food for the families. *Casier tonkinois II* and a new wave of immigrants arrived just as the Vichy government collapsed on March 9 and months before the Japanese left.

While such projects paled in comparison to later US-funded efforts of the Saigon regime to relocate northern refugees after 1954, they represent important models that likely guided planning for the larger refugee resettlement projects produced by Ngo Dinh Diem from 1954 to 1963. Both the neo-traditional, family-centered theme of the program and its location in the western Mekong Delta appeared in later programs such as the massive Cai San settlements (1956–63) in
Long Xuyen that received mostly Catholic refugees from the same northern areas of Thai Binh and Nam Dinh. The casiers tonkinois even attracted some American attention in 1945. While US military planners in 1945 were occupied with destroying Indochina’s oil depots, coal mines, bridges, and railroads in preparation for possible invasion, a few experts in the Roosevelt Administration were aware of the casier project. They translated a French article on the casiers tonkinois in October 1945; and this and other country studies on the rural masses were soon turned over to President Truman’s Point IV Program. While these Vichy resettlement programs of 1943–5 were short-lived, it is worth noting that the first Vietnamese government formed after the March 1945 Japanese coup acted to continue the policy of sending poor northern farmers to the south. As the famine raged in the north, the official newspaper of the Vietnam Nationalist Party proclaimed that the Minister of Supplies had approved the first group of an estimated one million people to be relocated in the south, presumably in the Long Xuyen Quadrangle.46

Conclusion: Postcolonial to postsocialist solutions to rural poverty

This late colonial discourse over rural poverty and property reform in Vietnam in the last years before 1945 provides an often-neglected historical context that better explains the actions of Ngo Dinh Diem and the Republic of Vietnam in the 1950s and 60s. The mass resettlement of northern refugees into the western Mekong Delta and Central Highlands (1956–63), promulgation of labor contract reform, and even the controversial agroville program (1959–62) had part of their logic firmly planted in this earlier discourse. As Edward Miller’s study of Diem indicates, the future leader of the Republic of Vietnam had long been interested in a Third Way alternative to the continuation of colonial land regulations and the ICP-led alternatives.47 With regard to agriculture, this Third Way involved some extent a continuation of older, moderate proposals evoked by Dr Thinh and Bui Quang Chieu to establish enforceable contracts governing wage labor in agriculture. Diem’s brother and closest advisor, Ngo Dinh Nhu, writing under the pen name Dan Sinh for the newspaper Xuoi Hoai in 1953, articulated for readers a distinctive approach to laws on private property. Contrasting the pro-French Associated State of Vietnam’s (1949–55) policies to both communism and capitalism, the thrust of Nhu’s argument was that most everyday transactions in the countryside should be protected from government intervention but that the masses would be protected from exploitation. Secondly, Nhu argued that the state had rights similar to eminent domain to require individual participation in developing larger projects such as canals, dikes, and roads.48

While it is tempting to think that specific ideas such as cooperatives, agricultural wage contracts, and land redistribution belonged to either the land reform movements of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam led by the Communist Party or the Republic of Vietnam led by Diem and his allies, it is essential to recognize that land reform in both the north and the south involved experimentation with new land or labor contracts and also with cooperatives. Where Viet Minh forces seized former plantation lands in the Mekong Delta, for example, they were careful to establish new tenant contracts that in many cases amounted to a reduction in rent with some added guarantees rather than a transfer of land title to their supporters. For example, one 1951 contract issued by local Viet Minh authorities in a “liberated area” (dat giai phong) to a farmer in My Tra Village (Cao Lãnh District, Sa Dec Province), notes that the local Resistance Committee in nearby Ba Sao Village consented to rent 1.9 hectares of land confiscated from Mr Tomasi, a French planter, giving a parcel number as described in the old colonial cadastral survey. Besides offering a substantially lower rent (28 giao or roughly half a metric ton in rice), the contract also offered many of the basic measures—disaster relief, fixed interest, and limits to publicly required labor—that colonial reformers had pushed since the days of the Popular Front.49 To the extent that farmers were allowed to add their input into these debates, notably at a public meeting attended by an American land reform advisor in 1956, over and again they emphasized that what they most wanted was not the abolition of private land ownership or even tenant farming but state-enforced limits on the interest rates charged by banks and private lenders.50

As other essays in this volume attest, the problem of regulating land rents and farm labor wages attracted much attention in twentieth-century Vietnam and is again attracting attention in the present. In the current era of “market-oriented socialism,” the centrist proposals of the Constitutionals for modifications to agricultural wage labor or even certain of Diem’s “Third Way” policies seem more relevant to debates over land and labor than past collectivization schemes or current foreign models of land privatization. Clearly there are continuing tensions between farmers and the state with regard to the extent to which the state can regulate private transactions and the extent to which the state can provide protections for small farmers and the landless. The Mekong Delta countryside today is becoming increasingly urban and increasingly industrialized; thus farming must compete with residential development and new factories for land. Recent scholarship has noted a strong trend toward land consolidation in the hands of private firms with increasing accusations of corruption levied by minority groups and the rural poor.51 In 2007, farmers affiliated with a movement called “Victims of Injustice” (dan oan) captured the attention of the international media and non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch to protest what they claimed were unjust land transactions.52

The continuing role of media, especially Internet-based media, and the presence of anthropologists, sociologists, and others studying rural poverty in Vietnam suggests that despite epic political changes in the past century, public discourse over landlessness and proposals for addressing difficulties faced by the rural poor are alive and well. Contemporary conflicts over landlessness, resettlement, and property transfers are colored by past conflicts in the colonial and postcolonial eras; likewise, present-day media reports and social science studies reflect earlier framings of the same issues.

Notes

1 Several excellent histories examine various dimensions of peasant life during the colonial and postcolonial eras. See Pierre Brocheux, The Mekong Delta: Ecology, Economy


3 Phi Van, Dong Que: Phong Su (Saigon: Dat Nuoc, 1957); see also Ngo Vinh Long, Before the Revolution, pp. 145–60.


7 Gilbert Chieu, “Une bataille intéressante” Supplément du Nong Co Min Dom, 23 October, 1907, p. 1.

8 For a more thorough discussion of the Minh Tan movement see Son Nam, Mien Nam dau la ky XX – Thien Dia Hoi va cuoc Minh Tan (Saigon: La Boi, 1971). See also Peycam, “Intellectuals and Political Commitment,” p. 64; and Brocheux, Mehg Delta, p. 73.


10 Peycam, p. 76.


13 Peycam, p. 111.


2 Bodies in perpetual motion

Struggles over the meaning, value, and purpose of fuzzy labor on the eve of collectivization

Ken MacLean

"We were tired and hungry all the time," said the elderly but still fit woman. Her statement caused the cadres who had been assigned to monitor my interview to suddenly stop what they were doing in the background to listen carefully to what Pham Thi Vach said next. I, too, was surprised by her blunt assessment of rural life, for Vach was nationally known for the contributions she had made toward "building socialism" in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) four decades earlier. My efforts to elicit further details from her were unsuccessful; the remainder of our conversation, while pleasant, did not diverge far from the widely available facts that are routinely cited in official depictions of her life.

Pham Thi Vach, who later became a Communist Party member and secretary for the People’s Committee in Kim Ty District (Hung Yen Province), first demonstrated her leadership potential in the late 1950s, while still a teenager. Concerned by heavy rains, she mobilized her peers to save the fall harvest one year by carrying out urgently needed repairs to dikes that protect Hung Cuong Commune from catastrophic floods. Leading by example, Vach personally dug, then carried more than 250 cubic meters of muddy soil to help reinforce the earthen embankments holding back the branches of the Red River that completely surround the low-lying commune on all sides. The ad hoc campaign, which lasted fifty days, was successful; other noteworthy achievements followed, as did a series of increasingly prestigious awards for the young woman affectionately dubbed the "Red River girl" in the state-controlled press. These awards culminated in the title of "Labor Hero" and a First-Class Medal of Merit, which Ho Chi Minh personally handed to Vach in 1961 in recognition of the role she played in transforming the commune, long known for producing more buggars than rice, into a more prosperous one.

This achievement was later celebrated in verse:

Hung Cuong has a newly built sluice,
A freshly packed dike, a recently planted tree [for]
Whoever stops and looks,
Nowadays there is a Party, and the banks of the Red River have levees

(Thanh Duy 1962: 44)
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