

‘THE MODERN BARBARIAN’:  
NGUYEN VAN VINH AND THE COMPLEXITY OF  
COLONIAL MODERNITY IN VIETNAM

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*Abstract.* This article studies the life and socio-cultural works of Nguyen Van Vinh in order to understand better the complexity of ‘colonial modernity’ in Vietnam. Vinh saw in an alliance with colonial France the chance to modernise Vietnam in Western ways. Thanks to his translations and his essays on Vietnamese society and culture, he helped open the way to a larger cultural revolution in the 1930s. It was a way of dealing with the humiliation of colonial domination and a way of putting Vietnam back on a civilisational par with the rest of the ‘modern’ world. At the same time, Nguyen Van Vinh served as a powerful propaganda tool for the colonial state in its attempts to cut off Vietnam from her Asian context and ally her closely with colonial France through the Vietnamese language. Indeed, Nguyen Van Vinh provides a revealing example of the colonial origins of the Francophonie policy in Vietnam that began long before French decolonisation.

French ignorance of the Annamese is certainly great; that of the Annamese about us is tremendous, fabulous, unimaginable. [...] The Annamese, the Annamese people, the Annamese masses are completely and absolutely ignorant of us. The immense majority understand nothing about us. [...] From the outset, I was lucky to make friends with several eminent Annamese, notably with M. Nguyen Van Vinh, the greatest Annamese writer of our time. It was he who led me, little by little, to fathom the gulf that separates us from the Annamese. And we asked ourselves by which means would we manage to bridge this total incomprehension.  
E. Vayrac, 1937

The news of Nguyen Van Vinh’s death in the mountains of Laos on 2 May 1936 seems to have caught everyone by surprise in Hanoi.<sup>1</sup> It was

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\* My thanks to the following for their kind comments and assistance: David Marr, William and Claire Duiker, Gilles de Gantès, Emmanuelle Affidi, Peter and Cam Zinoman, Pierre Brocheux, Daniel Hémerly, Andrew Hardy and especially Agathe Larcher-Goscha (who suggested the title).

<sup>1</sup> Delegation of Tchépone, No. 147, ‘*Au sujet du décès du journaliste Nguyen Van Vinh survenu à Keng Sep (Muong Tchépone)*’ (On the death of the journalist Nguyen Van Vinh in Keng Sep), 5 May 1936, Archives of the Résident Supérieur du Tonkin, Nouveau Fonds (hereafter cited RST/NF), dossier (hereafter cited as d.) 6884, Centre

well known that the founder of the *Annam Nouveau* (New Annam)<sup>2</sup> in 1931 and one of colonial Vietnam's greatest journalists and translators of Western literature had come up against some very serious financial troubles. Since 1 March, he had been forced to give up the direction of his newspaper in order to find a way to repay the debts he had amassed since the depression of 1929. What his reading public did not know was that he owed 40,000 *piastres* to a French associate named de Montpezat. The police had even been authorised to arrest Vinh. Desperate, the latter agreed to write for one of this family's newspapers in exchange for a reprieve. He got it. And in March, he left the *Annam Nouveau*. He sold his belongings, bid farewell to his wife and family, and headed for Laos to prospect for silver and gold with his longtime friend, A. Clémenti.<sup>3</sup> Indefatigably curious and always with something to say, Vinh kept wiring back his reportages on Lao society and culture to his readers in the *Annam Nouveau*.<sup>4</sup> Everyone expected him to bounce back; he always had. But ironically, the man who had advocated so passionately all his life the need to apply Western science and medicine to Vietnam died of dysentery, still searching for gold and no doubt a little something else.<sup>5</sup> Like one of his literary heroes, Alexander Dumas, Nguyen Van Vinh died penniless.

*Nguyen Van Vinh and the Complexity of Colonial Modernity in Vietnam*

Nguyen Van Vinh was a character. He was one of those individuals to whom one is either immediately attracted, seduced by his sharp wit, profound intelligence and incredible self-confidence; or put off by his biting satire, arrogance, or his less than flattering views of women

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des Archives d'Outre-Mer (hereafter cited as CAOM). His death was announced in the *Annam Nouveau* on 7 May 1936: 'La mort de M. Nguyen-Van-Vinh' (The death of Mr Nguyen Van Vinh), *Annam Nouveau* (hereafter cited as *AN*), 7 May 1931.

<sup>2</sup> 'Annam' and 'Annamese' were widely used during the colonial period for 'Vietnam' and 'Vietnamese'.

<sup>3</sup> Service de la Sûreté du Tonkin, No. 2164/S, 'Nguyen Van Vinh et l'Annam nouveau' (Nguyen Van Vinh and the *Annam nouveau*), 28 February 1936, signed by Arnoux, RST/NE, d. 4357, CAOM. A. Clémenti was the director and founder of the newspaper *L'Argus indochinois*. It is not sure that this Montpezat is the same one as the famous Catholic entrepreneur, Henri de Monpezat. My thanks to Gilles de Gantès for pointing this out.

<sup>4</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'Un mois avec des chercheurs d'or: la maison laotienne' (One month with gold prospectors: the Laotian House), *AN* (15 March 1936).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the cause of death of Nguyen Van Vinh, see: 'Au sujet du décès du journaliste Nguyen Van Vinh'.

and their potential role in society.<sup>6</sup> To say that he was sure of himself would be a euphemism. He liked to go up against commonly held ideas and take up lost causes. Journalism and translation, however, were his passions. The paper was a forum for debate, an exchange of ideas, and a means by which he believed he could attack the social, cultural and political problems of his time. Translation was a tool with which he could influence Vietnamese thinking and share his love for literature. The range of his interests was, indeed, remarkable. On one page, he could defend the direct French administration of Indochina, while on another he could lend his ardent support to the peasants against mandarin exploitation, or defend a poor rickshaw driver against the violence of a French *colon*. On one day, he could sketch a fascinating portrait of rural culture in Vietnam, and on the following day publish an essay of the highest quality on French literature or the technical intricacies of translating Vietnamese *chef d'oeuvres*.<sup>7</sup>

Nguyen Van Vinh was not alone, of course. There were others interested in similar cultural and social questions. Pham Quynh certainly comes to mind. Both men had similar backgrounds and were fierce competitors on the cultural and political scene until Nguyen Van Vinh passed away in 1936.<sup>8</sup> However, if much has been written about Pham Quynh, it is strange that such an eminent and controversial figure as Nguyen Van Vinh should have slipped through the cracks of contemporary historiography and research. Of course, for post-1954 Vietnamese nationalist historiography, his life posed some serious problems.<sup>9</sup> After all, he had 'collaborated' closely with the French colonial powers, advocated 'direct' French rule of Vietnam (and Indochina) and promoted French civilization and their 'enlightened' rule. Nor did it help his post-1945 nationalist standing that he had frequented colonial social circles or ridiculed, mercilessly, outdated Vietnamese customs and behavior which he found embarrassing and uncivilised. But most costly of all, I think was a highly

<sup>6</sup> See for example Nguyen Van Vinh, '*La femme au pays d'Annam*' (Women in the country of Annam), *AN* (15 May 1931).

<sup>7</sup> See Nguyen Van Vinh's comments on Rabelais, Michelet and Victor Hugo, as published by Nguyen Van To in the *Bulletin de la Société d'Enseignement Mutuel*, Nos. 1-2 (1936), cited by 'D', 'Nguyen Van Vinh', *Sud-Est*, No. 16 (August 1950), pp. 28-29.

<sup>8</sup> It was rumoured that Pham Quynh was not among the 3,000 who attended Nguyen Van Vinh's funeral. Police de l'Indochine, Service de la Sûreté au Tonkin, Hanoi, '*Note confidentiel no. 5049*', 9 May 1936, d. 6884, RSTNF, CAOM.

<sup>9</sup> There is no entry for Nguyen Van Vinh in the *Anthologie de la littérature vietnamienne* (Anthology of Vietnamese Literature), Vol. 3 (Hanoi: Editions en Langues Etrangères, 1975).

charged debate in 1932 with the scholar-patriot Huynh Thuc Khang, during which Nguyen Van Vinh ripped apart on the front-page of the *Annam Nouveau* Khang's mentor and one of Vietnam's greatest nationalist heroes, Phan Boi Chau. Nguyen Van Vinh wrote him off in 1932 as a failed revolutionary and a pitiful collaborator.<sup>10</sup> Communist nationalist historiography has had a hard time forgetting this.

Harder to explain is Nguyen Van Vinh's glaring absence in French studies of Vietnamese literature, culture and colonialism. If Pham Quynh looms large in French-language studies of Vietnam, other than Maurice Durand's excellent *Introduction à la littérature vietnamienne*, one searches in vain for Nguyen Van Vinh.<sup>11</sup> Even authors pushing the *francophonie* project in their publications have, surprisingly, overlooked Nguyen Van Vinh. This negligence is difficult to explain, for Vinh had latched on to the ideas of promoting the French language and culture as Vietnamese sites for discovering Western 'modernity' and 'culture' long before the French Ministry of the Francophonie picked up on it as a way to hang on to Empire after World War II.<sup>12</sup> Slightly better treatment of Vinh exists in English, though it remains

<sup>10</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'Phan-Boi-Chau: le révolutionnaire repentant' (The repentant revolutionary), *AN* (24 April 1932, 28 April 1932 and 22 May 1932). My thanks to Agathe Larcher-Goscha for bringing this article and debate to my attention. For more on this debate and Phan Boi Chau's association with the French after WWI, see: Agathe Larcher-Goscha, 'La légitimation française en Indochine: mythes et réalités de la collaboration franco-vietnamienne et du réformisme colonial (1905-1945)' (French legitimization in Indochina: myths and realities of Franco-Vietnamese collaboration and colonial reformism [1905-1945]) (Paris: doctoral thesis, Université de Paris VII, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Durand and Nguyen Tran-Huan, *Introduction à la littérature vietnamienne* (Introduction to Vietnamese Literature) (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, no date). Nguyen Van Ky does mention him in his history of modernisation in Vietnam during the colonial period: *La société vietnamienne face à la modernité* (Vietnamese Society and Modernity) (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh does not appear in the recent work of Bernard Hue, *Littératures de la péninsule indochinoise* (Literatures of the Indochinese Peninsula) (Paris: Karthala, 1999), published in collaboration with La Collection Universités Franco-phones, which aims to promote the emergence 'of a place of expression for the French language and scientific community', complete with a preface by a fervent advocate of *francophonie*, Richard Féray. Nguyen Van Vinh is also absent in Thanh Tâm Langlet and Thu Trang Gaspard's article, 'Les auteurs vietnamiens de langue française: un exemple d'échange culturel' (Vietnamese authors writing in French: an example of cultural exchange), *Etudes vietnamiennes*, Vol. 2, No. 128 (1998), pp. 90-107. There is nothing about Nguyen Van Vinh in 'Le Vietnam et la francophonie' (Vietnam and francophonie) by Nguyen Khac Vien, nor in 'La culture française au Vietnam' (French culture in Vietnam) by Cu Huy Can, both published in a special French edition of the historical magazine *Xua va nay* (Then and Now), no. 45, (November 1997), pp. ii-iv and viii-x respectively. For a more problematic approach to Franco-Vietnamese cultural relations, see Nguyen Van Ky, *La société vietnamienne face à la modernité*.

largely limited to his views on women and journalism.<sup>13</sup> To my knowledge, no in-depth study of his work and life exists in any Western language.<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, the first serious studies of Nguyen Van Vinh and his work were written after 1954 in the southern Republic of Vietnam. The best example is a special edition on Nguyen Van Vinh published in 1970 by the literary review *Van Hoc*.<sup>15</sup> Besides this publication, southern literary critics, Pham The Ngu and Kiem Dat, took Nguyen Van Vinh seriously in the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> That said, there does seem to be renewed interest in Nguyen Van Vinh in Vietnam today, although it is not clear whether it is related to a Franco-Vietnamese political promotion of the French language or a deeper interest in the man's little-studied political, social and cultural ideas.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it is a little of both.

Yet the fact that there is not much interest in and little written about Nguyen Van Vinh is not a reason in itself for undertaking this essay. So why write about him? Admittedly, there is an intrinsic attraction in the idea of resurrecting this controversial poor player, who strutted and fretted his hour so vigorously on the lively cultural stage of colonial Vietnam before disappearing for good into the mountains of Laos. While Nguyen Van Vinh's political ideas were indeed contested, I think that there was more to the man than just colonial collaboration. Through his translations, his journalism, theatre and his refinement of the Vietnamese language, *quoc ngu*, he acted as one of the leading Vietnamese brokers between the French culture introduced via the colonial project and the Vietnamese

<sup>13</sup> Neil Jamieson, Alexander Woodside and Hue Tam Ho Tai take a closer look at Nguyen Van Vinh's work. See: Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 65–80 and Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 29–30, 48, 51, 77 and 110. Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976) gives us a very subtle analysis of his socio-cultural project.

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuelle Affidi is writing a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Paris VII, in which she will discuss in detail Nguyen Van Vinh's life and works.

<sup>15</sup> *Van Hoc* (Saigon), No. 111 (September 1970).

<sup>16</sup> Kiem Dat, *Luan de Pham-Quynh va Nguyen-Van-Vinh* (On Pham Quynh and Nguyen Van Vinh) (Saigon: Nha Xuat Ban Tre, 1958) and Pham The Ngu, *Viet Nam van hoc su* (A History of Vietnamese Literature) (Saigon?: Nam At Ti, 1965; reprinted by Co So Xuat Ban Dai Nam, no date).

<sup>17</sup> See the commentary in *Xua va nay* on Nguyen Van Vinh's article devoted to French and Vietnamese linguistics, reprinted in No. 45 (November 1997), pp. 15–16 (in Vietnamese), pp. v–vi (in French), and 'Nhat bao' (The Daily), *Xua va nay*, No. 3 (1995), p. 18.

civilisation which it implicitly tried to transform and which responded in kind. With a foot firmly planted in both cultural worlds, Nguyen Van Vinh used *quoc ngu*, the printing press, the newspaper and the act of translating to channel Western culture and modernising ideas into Vietnamese society in unprecedented and wider ways than in earlier times. Although he would never have admitted it at the time, he helped pave the way for a larger cultural revolution in Vietnam in the 1930s, and one which, to some extent, has resumed in Vietnam since the reformist policy of *doi moi* softened the Vietnamese Communist Party's tight hold on cultural expression. This is one reason, I think, for studying this man's life and works.

Nguyen Van Vinh is of interest too precisely because he saw Vietnamese modernisation occurring in alliance with colonial France.<sup>18</sup> Some will object that he betrayed Vietnam by collaborating so closely with the French colonial project, while others might seek to resurrect him today as an authentic 'francophone' precursor or a forgotten 'non-communist' nationalist moderniser. It is true that Nguyen Van Vinh was no anti-colonialist revolutionary nationalist. His ties to French colonialism are and were clear. He was one of their main spokesmen and allies. And he was not the only one. However, rather than writing him off as a nationalist misfit, it might be more useful to consider why he conceived of Vietnam's overall modernisation in terms of an alliance with the French colonial project in Indochina. The problem with anti-colonialist approaches is that they tend to tell us little about who these individuals really were, what they wanted to do at the time, how they went about doing it or whether they succeeded or not. This is another reason for taking him seriously. This might help us to shed some new light on a larger group of Vietnamese who saw Vietnam's modernisation or eventual political liberation in terms of a contract with the French. I am thinking of Phan Chu Trinh, Tran Trong Kim, Bui Quang Chieu, Pham Quynh, Huynh Thuc Khang, and others (including the future Ho Chi Minh at the outset).<sup>19</sup> Governor-General Albert Sarraut raised their hopes after World War I by holding out the promise of an Indochinese charter, political evolution towards self-government or even independence.

<sup>18</sup> On the importance of this matter, see: Larcher-Goscha, '*La légitimation française en Indochine*'.

<sup>19</sup> In 1911, Ho Chi Minh applied unsuccessfully to the *Ecole Coloniale*. But the historical context needs to be kept in mind: 1910 was not 1945, or even 1925. Daniel Hémery, '*Jeunesse d'un colonisé, genèse d'un exilé. Ho Chi Minh jusqu'en 1911*' (The youth of a colonised, the genesis of an exile: Ho Chi Minh to 1911), *Approches Asie*, No. 11 (1992), pp. 82–157.

We now know that this would only be achieved at a devastating cost to Vietnam and its people; however, no one knew this in the early twentieth century.

Although communism and national independence were and remain fundamental historical questions, they were not the only subjects of debate at the time, nor were they the only perspectives for the future. Culture, religion, technology, the economy and social equality were equally important avenues of activism.<sup>20</sup> This article represents a modest and admittedly preliminary attempt to take another look at Nguyen Van Vinh and his attempts to modernise Vietnam in collaboration with the French. Because of space limitations, I will concentrate on his socio-cultural activities and what they might tell us about the complexity of the intersection of two different civilizations and cultures in a time of colonisation.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Nguyen Van Vinh*

Nguyen Van Vinh was born in the village of Phuong Duc in the northern province of Ha Dong on 15 June 1882.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, we know little about his parents or family life. According to Neil Jamieson, he 'came from a humble peasant family'.<sup>23</sup> He married several times, including with a French woman. One of his sons, Nguyen Giang, became a famous journalist and translator in the 1930s and 1940s; another, Nguyen Nhuoc Phap, was a well-known poet. What is sure is that from an early age Vinh was fascinated by the press and determined to be a part of its development in Vietnam. By the age of ten, he had already acquired a good knowledge of the French language. He perfected it at the *Collège des Interprètes*, from which he was graduated at the age of fourteen. He then entered into

<sup>20</sup> See especially David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) and Shawn McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> I have examined Nguyen Van Vinh's heated debate with Pham Quynh on the structures of French colonial rule and the political boundaries of Vietnamese and Indochinese nationalism in my *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism, 1887-1954* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1995), pp. 46-62. Admittedly, much remains to be done. Emmanuelle Affidi will analyse this question in much greater detail in her forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation.

<sup>22</sup> Vu Bang, 'Tuong nho mot buc thay: Quan-Thanh Nguyen Van Vinh?' (Recalling a letter: Nguyen Van Vinh), *Van Hoc* (Saigon), No. 111 (September 1970), p. 12. According to the lunar calendar, he was born on 30 April in the 35th year of the reign of Tu Duc.

<sup>23</sup> Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 65.

the Indochinese bureaucracy as a secretary. He worked in the colonial offices of Lao Cai, Kien An, Bac Ninh, and finally in the tribunal of Hanoi in 1904. While serving in these posts, especially in Kien An near the port of Haiphong, Vinh was able to meet foreigners and even began to study Chinese and some English. He had already begun to study Chinese characters and the basics of Vietnamese demotic script (*chu nom*). According to an old friend, Vinh was obsessed by languages and reading. It is also possible that he came into contact during this early time with French printers working for the colonial bureaucracy. In early 1906, for reasons which are still not clear, he resigned from the colonial bureaucracy and returned to his family, his childhood friends, and above all to his books.<sup>24</sup>

However, he did not remain idle for long. His curiosity was such that he was soon taking part in small intellectual groups like the ‘Tri Tri School’. Impressed by this young man’s mastery of their language and knowledge of their culture, and no doubt keen on keeping this budding talent on their side, the French sent him to Marseille in 1906 as part of the Vietnamese delegation to the Colonial Exposition. It was during this time that Nguyen Van Vinh, 24 four years old, discovered French theatre, the modern printing press, the newspaper and their potential firepower on the cultural front. At the colonial exposition and elsewhere, he chatted enthusiastically with Western journalists about the importance of the modern newspaper and the printing press.<sup>25</sup> In a letter home to his good friend Pham Duy Ton, Vinh shared the excitement of seeing *El Cid* on stage. He explained the impact that seeing this play live on stage had had on him, insisting that it was vastly more effective than just reading it. It was also during his trip to France that he decided once and for all that he would have to play a leading role in the modernisation of Vietnamese culture and society.<sup>26</sup> The young Nguyen Van Vinh must have been very sure of his calling, for on his return to Vietnam in 1907 he threw himself into creating a printing house and a Western-style press.

<sup>24</sup> Vu Bang, ‘*Tuong nho mot buc thay*’, pp. 12–14, based on Nguyen Van Vinh’s diary.

<sup>25</sup> ‘*Discours de M. Pham Huy Luc, Président de la Chambre des Représentants du Peuple du Tonkin*’ (Speech by M. Pham Huy Luc, President of the House of Representatives of the People of Tonkin), *AN* (11 May 1936), and ‘*Biographie*’ (Biography), *AN* (7 May 1936).

<sup>26</sup> ‘*Tho cua ong Vinh viet tu Mac-Xay gui cho o. Pham Duy Ton*’ (Letter from Vinh to Pham Duy Ton written from Marseille), in *Ky niem 90 nam ong Nguyen Van Vinh dich Kim Van Kieu* (The 90th Anniversary of Nguyen Van Vinh’s Translation of the Kim Van Kieu) (1997), and Vu Bang, ‘*Tuong nho mot buc thay*’, pp. 16–20, on his 1906 voyage to Marseille.





Figure 1: Pham Duy Ton, Pham Quynh and Nguyen Van Vinh, delegates to the Colonial Exhibition of 1922 in Marseille; source: <http://nguyentl.free.fr>.

Again, he was not alone in his desire to modernise Vietnam in association with the French. A group of Vietnamese intellectuals gathered around the famous scholar-patriot, Phan Chu Trinh, to create the 'Tonkin Free School', better known as the Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc. Its goal was to promote a renovation of Vietnamese society and culture along Western lines. Nguyen Van Vinh and Pham Duy Ton were both members of this early group of intellectuals, who saw Vietnam's modernisation in terms of an alliance with the French. At the top of their list was the importance of developing *quoc ngu* over Chinese characters, learning French and diffusing Western notions of science, sports, hygiene, education, and commerce and industry to the population at large. Unsurprisingly, Nguyen Van Vinh taught French to more Sino-Vietnamese-oriented intellectuals. Revealingly, the bible of the group was the *Book of Civilisation and Modern Studies* (*Van minh tan hoc sach*). In 1907, Phan Chu Trinh sent a reform package to the colonial government asking for educational reforms, instruction in French, agricultural development projects, and the Westernisation of traditional Vietnamese dress. Attracted by Republican ideas, Phan Chu Trinh began attacks on the impediments to progress represented by the Vietnamese monarchy and its mandarins, who would do their best a year later to make sure he never returned from the colonial prison of Poulo Condor, where he had been imprisoned following the outbreak of revolts in Vietnam.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 'Traduction d'une lettre en caractères chinois adressée le 15 juillet 1922 à Khai Dinh par

Nguyen Van Vinh would make these ideas the cornerstone of his political ideas for the rest of his life. It is not exactly clear why Vinh developed such an early hatred for the mandarins. It may be linked to his humble origins, the worsening misery of the Vietnamese peasantry he witnessed as a civil servant in the north, or perhaps his desire to advance more quickly through a Westernised bureaucracy with which he was more familiar. Like Phan Chu Trinh, Nguyen Van Vinh was also attracted early on in his life to French Republican ideas. In 1906 or 1907, he joined the Hanoi section of the League of Human Rights (Ligue des droits de l'homme). Formed in Hanoi in 1903, the League was designed to promote Republican ideals in the colonies, to check the abuses of colonialism, and, not without serious contradictions, to make known such new ideas as 'individual rights and liberties', 'citizenship', and 'egalitarianism' When the Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc was shut down by the French in 1908 and Phan Chu Trinh arrested on suspicion of his role in peasant uprisings that same year, Nguyen Van Vinh militated within the League in order to obtain his liberation from Poulo Condor. It was also within the League that Nguyen Van Vinh worked with such liberal thinkers as Félicien Challaye, Louis Caput, Marc Casati, and Francis de Pressensé among others. He would also form a close intellectual and personal friendship with the militant republican and long-time resident in Vietnam, Ernest Babut.<sup>28</sup> All of these Frenchmen tried to focus the French government's attention on its colonial duties. However, as Daniel Hémerly has pointed out, it was less a question of promoting 'anti-colonialism' than backing dynamic 'colonial reforms' under the watchful eye of the French. The 'Leaguers' accepted French colonialism in Indochina as a *fait accompli*, but not its excesses. While it is true that the League itself would sometimes have a hard time accepting Vietnamese as full members, one of the very rare Vietnamese to join was none other than Nguyen Van Vinh. This young intellectual was undoubt-

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*le lettré annamite Phan Chau Trinh* (Translation of a letter in Chinese characters sent on 15 July 1922 to Khai Dinh by the Annamite scholar Phan Chau Trinh), pp. 1, 15, 16, 21, d. Phan Chu Trinh, c. 371, file grouping Service de Protection du Corps Expéditionnaire, CAOM. According to Jamieson, it was Nguyen Van Vinh who filled out the necessary papers to open the Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc; Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> Ernest Babut ran the *Dai Viet tan bao*, the unofficial journal of the Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc. Phan Chu Trinh published some of his first articles in Chinese in this journal. There is a French translation of one of these articles reflecting Phan Chu Trinh's ideas on the need to adapt Western science and culture in Vietnam, entitled '*Réflexions sur le temps présent*' (Reflections on present times), *Pionnier Indo-Chinois*, No. 10 (29 December 1907), pp. 104–105.

edly influenced by the discussion and the ideas running through the League in the early 1900s. One of the major ideas of the League in Indochina was to promote 'a Republican idea of colonial action', one which would administer the colonies with 'enlightened control'. Nguyen Van Vinh would promote such ideas in the political programme he defended in the early 1930s.<sup>29</sup>

Nguyen Van Vinh also joined the anti-clerical and pro-Republican freemasons in Indochina.<sup>30</sup> He did so, once he had returned to Vietnam, sometime in the 1920s as a member of the Human Rights order of the 'Confucius' lodge (Tam Diem Khong Tu).<sup>31</sup> Upon Vinh's death, the Confucius lodge organized a funeral ceremony in Nguyen Van Vinh's honour. Three thousand people were in attendance. Nguyen Van Vinh was not the only Vietnamese to join the Freemasons. He joined Pham Huy Luc (1928), Pham Quynh (1925), Bui Quang Chieu, Le Thuoc, Duong Van Giao and a number of others from the Vietnamese elite. While some of the French Masons in Indochina balked at admitting Vietnamese in light of their 'lack of evolution', the opening of Freemasonry doors to Vietnamese elites in the 1920s led to new intellectual exchanges and reflections on the development of Vietnam and its place within the colonial project.<sup>32</sup> In 1925, the Ligue des droits de l'homme adopted a report penned by Pham Quynh, which, according to Jacques Dalloz, had supported the very anti-colonialist ideas of one of its main leaders, Félicien Challaye.<sup>33</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh

<sup>29</sup> 'Discours de M. Delmas, Président de la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen Section de Hanoi' (Speech of Mr Delmas, President of the League of Human Rights and of the Citizens' Section of Hanoi), *AN* (11 May 1936) and Daniel Hémery, 'L'Indochine, les droits humains entre colonisateurs et colonisés: la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme' (Indochina, human rights between the colonisers and the colonised: the League of Human Rights), *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* (French Review of Overseas History), Vol. 88, Nos 330–331 (2001), pp. 223–239.

<sup>30</sup> Although we do not know for sure if Nguyen Van Vinh was a member of the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO, French Section of the Workers' International)—I do not believe so—he certainly knew its leaders, like Louis Caput. Hoang Minh Giam, future Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was a member of the SFIO and collaborated on Vinh's *Annam nouveau*.

<sup>31</sup> It was apparently also called the 'Mixed International lodge', which was the Vietnamese section of the larger Grand Orient lodge with an office in Hanoi.

<sup>32</sup> Thien Tuong, 'Duong Thieu Thanh tu Hanoi den Bale Nguyen Van Vinh' (From Hanoi to Paris, Nguyen Van Vinh), *Van Hoc* (Saigon), No. 111 (September 1970), p. 37, and D, 'Nguyen-van-Vinh', p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Dalloz, 'Les Vietnamiens dans la franc-maçonnerie coloniale' (The Vietnamese in colonial Freemasonry), *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* (French Review of Overseas History), Vol. 85, No. 320 (1998), pp. 103–118; his 'La SFIO d'Indochine, 1945–1954' (The SFIO in Indochina), *Approches-Asie*, No. 14 (1997), pp. 57–72; 'Discours de M. Janvier, Fondateur de la Loge "Confucius"' (Speech by Mr Janvier, founder of the 'Confucius' Lodge), *AN* (11 May 1936).

could not have been immune to the ideas and animated debates circulating within these Republican organisations, especially those hostile to the monarchy.

In spite of his time-consuming cultural and literary activities, Nguyen Van Vinh still found time for politics. At the age of 25, he started his political career as a municipal council member. He was a member of the Grand Council of Economic and Financial Interests (Grand Conseil des Intérêts Economiques et Financiers). In 1913, he was elected to the Advisory House of Tonkin (Chambre Consultative du Tonkin), which dispatched him to the Colonial Exposition in Marseille in 1922. Once in France, Nguyen Van Vinh probably contacted Phan Chu Trinh. Given their previous collaboration, Albert Sarraut's promise of political liberalisation, and the disdain they held for the monarchy and its mandarins, it seems likely that Nguyen Van Vinh sought advice from Phan Chu Trinh on the future tack of non-violent Vietnamese reformism. Both probably agreed on the need to do away with the antiquated monarchy. After all, it was in 1922 that Phan Chu Trinh, in a vitriolic letter to King Khai Dinh, lambasted the Vietnamese monarchy, accusing it of being 'despotic' and opposed to the very political, social and cultural innovations that would save Vietnam from its perilous situation.<sup>34</sup> Phan Chu Trinh's ideas were exactly what Nguyen Van Vinh wanted to hear. But he would take them much further in the political programme he would promote through the creation of the *Annam nouveau* in 1931.<sup>35</sup>

### *The 'Cultural Revolution' of Nguyen Van Vinh*

#### *The Printing House*

Since 1907, emboldened by his 'discovery' in Europe of the modern printing press, the newspaper and the potential of the fine arts for social change, Nguyen Van Vinh focused his attention on promoting a social and cultural revolution of 'traditional' Vietnamese society. The printing press, translations, newspapers, theatre and film would be his preferred arms. Nguyen Van Vinh learned the art of printing on the job, apparently without any previous training. His long friendship with Ernest Babut and especially the famous printer and associate of the Vietnamese press, F.H. Schneider, taught him the basics of

<sup>34</sup> 'Traduction d'une lettre en caractères chinois adressée à Khai Dinh par le lettré annamite Phan Chau Trinh'.

<sup>35</sup> See my *Vietnam or Indochina?* pp. 46–62.

printing, publishing, and advertising. Around 1910, he and Schneider opened a small publishing house called the Bibliothèque Franco-annamite de Vulgarisation (Pho Thong Giao Khoa Thu Xa). The principal idea was to publish and distribute translations and new ideas in *quoc ngu* for an expanding Vietnamese readership. In the 1920s, he teamed up with another Frenchman, E. Vayrac, to create an even more sophisticated publication series entitled *La Pensée de l'occident*. In addition to government subsidies, Nguyen Van Vinh dug into his own pocket to invest in modern printing equipment, paper and chemicals imported from Europe. During his 1922 trip to France, for example, he stole away from the exotic Colonial Exposition—which in his eyes froze Vietnamese into the very tradition he despised—in order to purchase new equipment for his printing press. He went all the way to Germany to find what he wanted.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Translations*

Thanks to his printing knowledge and connections, Nguyen Van Vinh was strategically well positioned to launch one of his major cultural battles: the translation of major Western literary works. Vinh was among the first (after Truong Vinh Ky and Huynh Tinh Cua) to recognise the modern potential of translations to create a bridge between 'East and West', and to change the way people thought by introducing new ideas and forms into Vietnam. The translation of the Western novel was one such example. He published several remarkable translations of key works of French literature, notably Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, *Les femmes savantes*, *L'Avare*, and *Le malade imaginaire*; Victor Hugo's *Les misérables*; La Fontaine's *Les fables*; and Alexandre Dumas' *Les trois mousquetaires* among many others. He also translated a number of English works (from the French), such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.<sup>37</sup> Many of his first translations were published by Vayrac and *La pensée de l'occident*.

As we shall see, Nguyen Van Vinh undertook these translations in order to make French culture better known to the Vietnamese.

<sup>36</sup> Armée du Rhin (Army of the Rhine), 'Au sujet du journaliste et imprimeur Nguyen Van Vinh' (On the journalist and printer Nguyen Van Vinh), 10 August 1922, d. 1382, archives repatriated from Russia, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Vincennes, France.

<sup>37</sup> Recent scholarship in France has suggested that Molière may not have written all the works that bear his name. See for example, Dominique Labbé, *Corneille dans l'ombre de Molière: Histoire d'une découverte* (Corneille in the Shadow of Molière: The History of a Discovery) (Paris: Les Impressions Nouvelles, Collection 'Bâtons rompus', 2003).

But there was more to it than cultural politics. The art of translating literature from one language to another, the idea of crossing massive cultural divides to make one thought system intelligible to another in his or her native language, must be one of the most important intersections and signposts for studying cultural transfers in the world. Of course, translators existed in pre-colonial Vietnam. They had mainly been in charge of dealing with a variety of European and Asian traders or involved in domesticating Chinese Confucian classics. However, French colonisation linked Vietnam to a larger literary world, not just a French one, but one which could channel English, American and other literatures into Vietnam via French translations themselves (for example, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*). Suddenly, a whole new literary world appeared on the Vietnamese horizon. However, without translators, this exciting universe of new ideas, personages, and adventures would remain incomprehensible.

Of course, younger generations of Vietnamese would be increasingly at ease in French, and would prefer reading these works in the original language. However, even today circumstantial evidence suggests that they prefer reading many of Nguyen Van Vinh's *quoc ngu* translations, for he successfully tailored the French characters and mentalities to their Vietnamese cultural equivalents. If this is true, then this is no small cultural feat. It seems quite possible that even young 'Westernised' Vietnamese got their first taste of Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* and Hugo's *Les misérables* through Nguyen Van Vinh, and only later via the original French version. Moreover, in spite of increased French language instruction in colonial schools, a vast *quoc ngu* reading public continued to develop during the entire colonial period. Reaching the Vietnamese 'masses' meant reaching them in *quoc ngu* as much as in French.

However, Nguyen Van Vinh's translations are important for other reasons. If Nhat Linh chose the modern Western novel as his favourite literary weapon for attacking out-dated customs and promoting new ideas more effectively and widely, Nguyen Van Vinh was carefully selecting his French plays and novels for translation with an eye on the socio-political messages he wanted to transmit to his Vietnamese readers. If carefully and effectively translated, Nguyen Van Vinh sought to domesticate these French stories and their modern notions of satire, comedy and intrigue as ways of promoting his own cultural programme in Vietnam. In a way, he was taking the author's irony and making it his own. And this built upon a deep Vietnamese tradition for political satire. For example, there is no denying that Nguyen Van Vinh despised the mandarin system and had little respect for the Vietnamese monarchy. It is no accident, I think, that Vinh chose

to translate La Fontaine's *Les Fables* (1668). La Fontaine used animals in his fables in order to criticise seventeenth century French society, the court's sycophants, and the King in particular. Like Molière, La Fontaine considered the court to be infested with parasites and impostors, who only worsened the plight of the people they were supposed to rule benevolently. He used comedy and satire, hidden in the form of an animal society, to poke fun at the ineffectiveness and corruption of the French monarchy and its obsequious courtesans. Though Vinh could not attack French colonialism in this way, he certainly had no qualms about using satire and irony against the Vietnamese monarchy. And given the French desire to avoid having Nguyen Van Vinh translate eighteenth century political philosophers (as he did with Rousseau, as we shall see below), they had little choice but to look the other way, at least until the early 1930s, when he took veiled stabs at the Vietnamese monarchy.

Several other works translated by Nguyen Van Vinh also carry this anti-monarchical theme. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* certainly comes to mind. So does Fénelon's *Les aventures de Télémaque*. The latter was banned by Louis XIV after its publication in 1699, considered to be a satire of the court. Fénelon had written a few years earlier a 'Letter to Louis XIV', in which he spoke bluntly of the misery of the French peasantry and the need for 'liberal reforms'. Nguyen Van Vinh was taking similar action in Vietnam against what he saw as the rapacious mandarins of Annam and Tonkin. It is hard to believe that Fénelon's reflections in *Télémaque* on good government and 'natural rights' for all in society are not linked to the Republican ideas Nguyen Van Vinh encountered in the Human Rights League and among the Freemasons. And Nguyen Van Vinh's translation of Victor Hugo's *Les misérables* reveals his keen interest in social questions, which we see again in Vinh's realist and moving writings on the Vietnamese village and the misery that pervaded it.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, by translating these works into Vietnamese, Nguyen Van Vinh also made a major contribution to the development of Vietnamese literature. New genres of comedy, tragedy, satire, etc., were introduced into an already extremely rich Vietnamese cultural heritage. Nguyen Van Vinh's translations of Molière, especially *Le malade imaginaire* and *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, were particularly important in the development of modern Vietnamese satire and theatre. For example, *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, first performed on stage in France in 1670, satirised the newly rich shopkeeper, M. Jourdain, whose only concern

<sup>38</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'Le froid' (The cold), *AN*, 25 January 1934.

is to climb the social ladder as high as possible. To this end, he is ready to pay out large sums of money and to act in ridiculous ways in order to learn civilised manners, gallantry and all those things he needs to break into a class and a level of civilisation which have been out of his social reach. As Alexander Woodside has brilliantly shown, Nguyen Van Vinh transformed a French bourgeois gentleman into an equally ridiculous Vietnamese mandarin, who could not decide whether or not to wear his tunic to future social occasions. As Woodside writes:

Perhaps the theatrical spectacle of a floundering bourgeois nobleman (or his Vietnamese mandarin alter ego) attempting to learn more cosmopolitan ways tallied with anxieties and ambitions common to many Vietnamese intellectuals at that time. At least it may have satisfied their common intuition that even the antics of Molière's Monsieur Jourdain might provide clues about how to acquire, or how *not* to acquire more 'modern'—a perhaps more effective—reflexes of behavior.<sup>39</sup>

However, Nguyen Van Vinh did not limit his translations to the French. He was no assimilationist. Already in 1907, together with Phan Ke Binh, he had published a *quoc ngu* translation of the Chinese classic *Tam quoc* (The Three Kingdoms) and Nguyen Du's magisterial *Kim van kieu* apparently from its original demotic script, *chu nom*. Vinh continually revised and improved upon the latter throughout the years. The seventh edition of 1923 would have a print run of 30,000 copies.<sup>40</sup> Thus, not only did Vinh help bring French culture to Vietnam, but he also made intelligible one of Vietnam's great national classics to a population that had, by an irony of history, been cut off from it by the romanisation of the Vietnamese writing script. This was largely due to Nguyen Van Vinh's emphasis on refining and promoting *quoc ngu* and his belief in the power of modern, methodological translations (he was a French trained interpreter). He no doubt realised the effectiveness of transmitting the *Kim van kieu* in *quoc ngu* rather than through oral tradition. It is also significant that he did not translate this cultural masterpiece into French first.

This translation of *Kim van kieu* served Nguyen Van Vinh well when it came to diffusing it visually, apparently as Vietnam's first story film. This occurred in Hanoi in 1924, thanks to Paul Thierry and his studio, Indochine Films et Cinémas. It was later shown elsewhere in Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh was also among the first to introduce

<sup>39</sup> Woodside, *Community and Revolution*, p. 86.

<sup>40</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh (transl.), *Kim Van Kieu* (Hanoi: Hieu Ich-Ky, 1923).

<sup>41</sup> Quoc Anh, 'Nguoi Viet Nam dau tien co vu cho dien anh' (The first Vietnamese to turn a film), *Tuoi Tre Chu Nhât* (31 December 1995).



Western-style theatre to Vietnam in 1920, when he directed his translation of Molière's *Le malade imaginaire*. This Vietnamese adaptation of Molière was performed in Hanoi, and it was apparently a great success. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Western style theatre, literature and cinematography would continue to grow. But this younger generation would go further than Nguyen Van Vinh. Rather than borrowing and customising the French theatre or novel to Vietnamese realities via translation or adaptations, young militants such as Vu Trong Phung and Nhat Linh staged their own plays in Hanoi (Vu Trong Phung's *Khong mot tieng vang/Not a sound*) and attack the Vietnamese mandarinatone through their own novels and leitmotifs (Nhat Linh's *Doan tuyet/Rupture*), though often borrowing heavily from the Western model. Strangely, Nguyen Van Vinh never recognised the achievements of his young inheritors. He saw himself as the only intermediary capable of negotiating the Western and Vietnamese traditions.

*Nguyen Van Vinh, Quoc Ngu and the Vietnamese Public*<sup>42</sup>

The development of the *quoc ngu* newspaper was the other way by which Nguyen Van Vinh counted on implementing his socio-cultural programme. He was not the first to recognise the importance of the vernacular script developed by Portuguese and French Jesuits. Pétrus Vinh Ky, a Catholic, had gone far in popularizing *quoc ngu* at the end of the nineteenth century. The *Gia dinh bao* had already served as Vietnam's first newspaper in *quoc ngu* and Chinese characters. Yet Nguyen Van Vinh would take these advances even further at the beginning of the twentieth. As he wrote on the cover of his translation of *Kim van kieu*, the future of Vietnam depended on the use of *quoc ngu*.

His journalist career certainly bore this out. In 1907, Nguyen Van Vinh joined the *Dang co yung bao*, a reformist paper countenanced by the French. Vinh directed the *quoc ngu* section. During this time, he joined forces with the director of the paper, his old friend F.H. Schneider, in order to establish the foundation for a wider diffusion of his *quoc ngu* translations and essays on modernisation. Vinh had already worked for Schneider in 1910 on the famous southern newspaper, *Luc tinh tan van*, as well as two short-lived French language journals: *Notre journal* (1908–1909) and *Notre revue* (1910), both edited by Schneider. Around 1911, Vinh and Schneider travelled together to the North in search of new experiences and work. With the support of the colonial

<sup>42</sup> For more on this, see: McHale, *Print and Power*.

government, they launched the famous *Dong duong tap chi* (Indochinese Review, 1913–1916) in a double bid to head off the violent anti-colonialism that was on the rise at the time and to promote the socio-cultural development of Vietnam in collaboration with the French. All of these early papers, however, were severely censured by the French colonial government. During World War I, Vinh joined Schneider to run northern Vietnam's first daily, the *Trung ban tan van* (Northern Central Modern News) (1912–1942?). After World War I, he also joined another famous scholar, Tran Trong Kim, to publish an educational and scientific review for youth, which would run well into the 1930s.

At the outset, Nguyen Van Vinh hoped to reach a growing Vietnamese reading public in order to promote his main ideas. By 1917, there were an estimated 75,000 Vietnamese school students, and by 1921 the total number of students was estimated at around 150,000.<sup>43</sup> By 1931, Nguyen Van Vinh considered that the Vietnamese reading public numbered around 10,000 people (apparently just for Tonkin).<sup>44</sup> In the *Indochinese Review*, Nguyen Van Vinh penned hundreds of articles on Western hygiene, medicine, sports, literature and current events. I have not yet been able to carry out a systematic survey of Nguyen Van Vinh's articles in the *Indochinese Review* and the *Trung ban tan van*. However, judging from a close reading of the *Annam nouveau*, conceived by Nguyen Van Vinh as a blueprint for creating a 'New Annam', one of the interesting things about the man is the wide range of his essays and their depth. Like other reform-minded colleagues, he wrote at length on educational and political reform, as well as the need to develop Vietnamese commerce and society. However, Nguyen Van Vinh also had a curiosity for social questions, which led him to write some fascinating studies on popular Vietnamese art, astrology, gambling, cooking, law, birth certificates, nationality, entrepreneurs and so on.<sup>45</sup>

It would thus be wrong to think that Vinh was merely an elitist who was only concerned with reading and translating Molière from

<sup>43</sup> Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p. 80.

<sup>44</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, '*La presse indigène libre*' (The indigenous free press), *AN* (20 April 1931).

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Nguyen Van Vinh, '*Art populaire*' (Popular art), *AN* (1 January 1934), '*Géomancie*' (Geomancy), *AN* (28 July 1932), '*Jeux permis et jeux interdits*' (Permissible and forbidden games), *AN* (12 May 1935), '*Les bonnes choses d'Annam*' (The good things of Annam), *AN* (28 July 1932), '*Etat civil*' (Birth certificate), *AN* (1 January 1933), '*La tuberculose*' (Tuberculosis), *AN* (4 June 1933), '*La question du nuoc-mam vue du Tonkin*' (The question of Nuoc-mam as seen from Tonkin), *AN* (28 September 1933), among many others.

the original French. One of the less well-known sides of this man is his deep interest in social questions, marginal groups, and above all in the countryside and the plight of the peasantry. Vinh's very early interest in the 'peasant question' undoubtedly came from his poor, rural background and the nine years he spent in the countryside as a low-level colonial bureaucrat. Few other Western-educated Vietnamese intellectuals had Nguyen Van Vinh's rural background or hands-on knowledge of peasant affairs and their misery. It may have been further stimulated by the novels he translated on the misery of the seventeenth century French peasantry or their exploitation by the monarchical system.

Recipients of particular scorn from Vinh in these articles were the mandarins, whom he considered to be exploiting the peasants and against whom he saw the French doing little.<sup>46</sup> Vinh set upon them with a vengeance, particularly in the more censure-free pages of the *Annam nouveau*.<sup>47</sup> Part of his idea was to try to provoke the French into doing something, or at least try to inform and to move the French-reading Vietnamese urbanites, who constituted the only elite capable of intervening on behalf of the peasants in his view. Vinh dedicated himself to finding modern solutions to these perennial problems. He consulted with experts such as Pierre Gourou on ways of improving the plight of the peasants.<sup>48</sup> He wrote essays on how to use modern science and Vietnamese ingenuity in order to bring clean, running water to the countryside.<sup>49</sup> One of the most interesting social solutions that Nguyen Van Vinh suggested was the development of local industries, such as tobacco and silk. He also put forward plans for developing lending associations and taxes to help fund rural development projects, such as electrification and the extension of drinking water beyond the cities.<sup>50</sup> While these questions cannot be studied in detail here, it is clear from scores of articles that Nguyen Van Vinh was very concerned about social and rural problems, as well as trying to find solutions to them. As he wrote in a famous article in 1934: 'If

<sup>46</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'Misère et colonisation' (Misery and colonisation), *AN* (23 February 1933).

<sup>47</sup> The *Trung Bac Tan Van* was censored much more than *Annam Nouveau*.

<sup>48</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'Les industries villageoise' (Village industries), *AN* (28 January 1934).

<sup>49</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'La question d'eau potable dans nos villages' (The problem of drinking water in our villages), *AN* (2 July 1933) and 'L'eau dans le village' (Water in the village), *AN* (13 August 1933).

<sup>50</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'Le financement des entreprises d'intérêt rural' (Financing rural businesses), *AN* (24 August 1933) and 'Projet de création d'un établissement de crédit foncier privilégié' (Project to create an establishment for favourable land lending), *AN* (9 November 1933).

I take it upon myself to treat all of these questions on the village, and this in a paper targeting almost exclusively urbanites, it is because the village is the key to progress in this country which is essentially agricultural'.<sup>51</sup> Any definitive judgment of Nguyen Van Vinh will have to take into account his detailed studies of Vietnamese villages, their problems and possible reforms.<sup>52</sup> For communist nationalists like Vo Nguyen Giap and Truong Chinh were not the only Vietnamese concerned about 'The Peasant Problem', the title of a famous essay they published in the 1930s.

The press was important to Nguyen Van Vinh for another reason. It was not enough to write in *quoc ngu*. Like Pham Quynh and others, he wanted to systematise and modernise it completely, so that it would be able to express Vietnamese scientific, economic, literary and cultural ideas with unprecedented precision. Again, this subject is a vast one that merits a separate study. Suffice it to say that Vinh wrote extensively in Vietnamese and French on the need to unify and systematise Vietnamese orthography and grammar, so as to augment its effectiveness, clarity and impact. He promoted a standardisation of *quoc ngu* for teaching Vietnamese in schools. He wanted clear and concise etymologies for all words, especially those coming from Chinese.<sup>53</sup> He wrote at length on Vietnamese phonetics, transliterations, adaptations, and translations from French and Chinese. He even published his (re)translations, step-by-step, of the *Kim van kieu*, explaining in a public forum to both French and Vietnamese readers the complexity of the enterprise and its cultural importance. Some of his most fascinating reflections on *quoc ngu* and its linguistic functioning are to be found in the *Annam nouveau*. Through this newspaper, he tried to make *quoc ngu* known not just to the Vietnamese, but also to the French. He was even an early advocate of teaching Vietnamese to the French. He believed that any educational progress between peoples must go in both directions. It was first on his list for bringing together the French and the Vietnamese, despite the racial and colonial chasm that effectively divided them in practice.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'Le village et la cité' (The village and the city), *AN* (25 March 1934).

<sup>52</sup> See especially: Martin Grossheim, *Nordvietnamesische Dorfgemeinschaften: Kontinuität und Wandel* (North Vietnamese Village Associations: Continuity and Change) (Hamburg: Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde, No. 282, 1997), especially Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>53</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'L'orthographe du quoc-ngu' (The spelling of *quoc-ngu*), *AN* (25 September 1932, 29 September 1932).

<sup>54</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'Les noms annamites' (Annamese names), *AN* (21 April 1931, 25 April 1931, 28 April 1931).

*Nguyen Van Vinh and the Problem  
of 'Civilisation' in a Time of Domination*

More recent discussions of Nguyen Van Vinh cite with derision his famous article, 'Making Fun of Everything' and Vinh's attacks on what he saw as the shortcomings of Vietnamese culture, such as customs related to childbearing, betel chewing, corruption, superstitions, etc. Confronted by the West via colonialism, Vinh was determined to regenerate Vietnam by attacking what he saw as its social vices and out-dated manners and dress. While it might be argued that this was very much a Western approach, it was nevertheless designed with a cultural programme if not a nationalist goal in mind: to show that Vietnam was just as civilised as other nations, including the coloniser. Between 1913 and 1915, Vinh wrote dozens of articles and essays about the need to change Vietnamese society in order to make it more 'civilised' (*van minh*). Indeed, one of his greatest preoccupations during his career was to put Vietnam back onto the map of 'civilised' nations. Troubled by the implications of Social Darwinism, Nguyen Van Vinh saw a regeneration of Vietnam in the careful adaptation of Western modernisation to Vietnamese society via the French colonial project.

To take but one example, he considered modes of dress to be an important indicator of a country's level of civilisation. In an essay entitled, 'A Question of Dress', Vinh states at the outset how he sees this apparently superficial socio-cultural transformation as one of the keys to establishing parity with the West and other 'modernising' countries across the globe:

Like the Turks, the Siamese adopted European dress except for one detail. The Turks kept the *fez*, the Siamese kept the *sampot*. Both have just abandoned these last vestiges of their traditional costume. They want to affirm in this way that their nations are completely Europeanised and that from now on they intend to resemble, from the outside, all the peoples of European civilisation. [...] In Asia, the Japanese adopted European dress after having organised themselves in a European fashion. The Chinese did the same, and after them the Siamese. In so doing, all of them have succumbed to the mystique of the influence of outward appearances on inner transformations. Backward peoples have always thought, upon their first encounter with European civilisation, or at least with European organisation, that they had to adopt exterior manners in order to affirm their desire to equal the European in the eyes of the world and in their own eyes.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'Question de costume' (The question of dress), *AN* (3 November 1932).

Turning to Vietnam, Vinh regretted the slow transition to Western styled clothing. He admitted that a certain standardisation was occurring thanks to the dress code required of bureaucrats and soldiers. He saw in the adoption of Western clothes and styles an increase in civilisational status for Vietnam, closer to that of the Europeans and further from what he saw as backward Vietnamese practices and customs. However, changes in dress had to go hand-in-hand with shifts in ways of thinking. Vinh deplored social misfits who dressed in Western garb, but who were more interested in social acceptance by the French than in the modernisation of thought that should accompany this sartorial change. In this context, one can better understand why Nguyen Van Vinh was so keen to transform Molière's M. Jourdain into a status-seeking, ridiculously dressed mandarin. Like Phan Chu Trinh, Nguyen Van Vinh also attacked what he saw as out-dated feudal rituals (the *lay*<sup>56</sup> in particular) of the mandarins and their king. For Vinh, civilised Vietnam had to follow the examples of independent Thailand, Turkey, China and Japan. Like Vietnamese cadres slipping into slick Western suits today, the same ones dressing up 'hill-tribes' in colourful garb for foreign tourists,<sup>57</sup> Vinh regretted terribly that foreigners continued to see Vietnamese dressed in tunics and traditional garb, observing them like museum pieces from the past (*'spectacles amusants pour les Européens'*, as he wrote).<sup>58</sup> Westernisation was ineluctable, even a good thing he argued, in order to demonstrate the development and advanced nature of the nation and its place in a wider civilised order:

There are thus profound reasons behind the changes adopted by the Turks, the Egyptians, the Japanese, the Chinese, the Siamese, in both the details and in the whole of their traditional dress. It is a step towards the unity of man in the manifestations of his collective life, to the chagrin of fans of the picturesque and of local colour.<sup>59</sup>

However, clothing was not enough. Nguyen Van Vinh wanted to show the French that the Vietnamese could be just as civilised as them in the fine arts. His desire to stage Molière's *Le malade imaginaire* with Vietnamese actors in the early 1920s was specifically conceived, at least in part, to show the French that the Vietnamese were entirely capable of understanding and interpreting this complex piece of Western culture. As an internal French police report even conceded:

<sup>56</sup> A type of low bow with joined hands.

<sup>57</sup> Similar to the Euro-Americans who liked to dress their 'Indians' in traditional garb for photo opportunities, world fairs and museum objects.

<sup>58</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, *'Question de costume'*.

<sup>59</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, *'Question de costume'*.

Vinh's version of Molière's work had the 'aim of showing the French population in Annam that the inhabitants of this country know just as well as [the French] how to appreciate the works of Molière and other famous [Western] writers'.<sup>60</sup> Culture was a weapon for erasing the humiliation of colonial domination.

Nguyen Van Vinh had similar ideas in mind in putting *Kim van kieu* on the big screen. As he wrote in the *Trung bac tan van*, this film showed the French and the world that the Vietnamese were not a 'savage race' (*going moi ro*). This film would allow the Vietnamese 'to let the world know' that the Vietnamese were also 'a part of humanity', and not a primitive or backward people. Interestingly, he added that the film was one of the newest, fastest and effective ways to get Vietnam's message heard.<sup>61</sup>

Of course, Nguyen Van Vinh, like many others across Asia, Europe and elsewhere, was buying into the Western definition of 'civility', 'civilisation' and 'manners'.<sup>62</sup> And for those who focus on the 'pre-colonial' period or on the uniqueness of Vietnamese tradition, culture or identity, Nguyen Van Vinh's westernising programme might seem strange, superficial, or even annoying. All the same, I still think that Vinh should be taken seriously, for he was not alone in his thinking. Indeed, one should not forget that similar ideas linking 'civilisation', 'Westernisation', 'modernisation' and 'nationalism' could be found in Japan, Thailand, China, and even in the United States.<sup>63</sup> The adaptation of Western culture, manners and dress modes in Meiji-era Japan provides revealing comparisons (as does the West's borrowing from Asia for centuries). For young Meiji nationalists, adopting Western methods was seen as a way of establishing civilisational parity with the Western powers themselves.<sup>64</sup> The cultural policy of the 'New Life' programme in Republican China also comes to mind. In South-east Asia, one need only think of the 'cultural mandates' adopted by Pibul Songkram at the end of the 1930s, which called on the Thais to wear western clothing, greet each other with a friendly 'hello' (*sawat-*

<sup>60</sup> Armée du Rhin, 'Au sujet du journaliste et imprimeur Nguyen Van Vinh', p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, *Trung Bac Tan Van*, cited in Quoc Anh, 'Nguoi Viet Nam dau tien co vu cho dien anh'.

<sup>62</sup> On the process of civilisation and culture, see the classic work of Norbert Elias, *Civilisation des mœurs* (Civilisation of Manners) (Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1999), 2nd edition.

<sup>63</sup> Harvey Levenstein, *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 3–84.

<sup>64</sup> See the excellent study of Lionel Babicz, *Le Japon face à la Corée à l'époque Meiji* (Japan and its Relations with Korea during the Meiji Era) (Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, 2002), Chapters 4–7.

*diu*), or kiss their wives goodbye on the cheek before going off to work. For Pibul, these were all signs of ‘civilisation’ (*siwilai*). In fact, some of the literary, artistic and manner changes that we find in colonial Vietnam are remarkably similar to those occurring in Thailand and no doubt Meiji Japan.<sup>65</sup> The Westernisation of a country did not necessarily require direct European colonial intervention<sup>66</sup>—even if, fascinatingly, Meiji-era Japan behaved exactly like the European colonial powers when they were in Korea, delivering a remarkably similar *mission civilisatrice*.<sup>67</sup> Thus what Nguyen Van Vinh was doing with discourses on ‘progress’, ‘civilisation’ and ‘modernity’ was not just a Franco-Vietnamese or *francophonie* affair.<sup>68</sup> The complex intersections that occurred in colonial Vietnam were therefore part of a larger historical process of global interactions accelerated during the colonial period, but which, it should never be forgotten, had long existed in Asia before the ‘arrival’ of the West.<sup>69</sup> It is in this context of *van minh*, I think, that one should also judge Nguyen Van Vinh’s attacks on traditional society and culture, as well as his proto-nationalist desire to establish civilisational equality with the coloniser and the rest of the ‘modern world’. His desire to wear Western clothes, a colonial hat,

<sup>65</sup> For more on the question of civilisation in Thailand, see the excellent article by Thongchai Winichakul, ‘The quest for “Siwilai”: a geographical discourse of civilizational thinking in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Siam’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (2000), pp. 528–549, as well as Annette Hamilton’s article in Craig J. Reynolds (ed.), *National Identity and Its Defenders, Thailand, 1939–1989* (Clayton: Monash University, 1991). Most studies (especially those in French) put the French colonisation of Indochina in a problematical and geographical vacuum, cut off from Asia, and anchored in a schematically ‘francophone’ framework, too often isolated from comparisons of a larger scope. Two excellent exceptions: the multidisciplinary study of Denys Lombard (ed.), *Rêver l’Asie: Exotisme et littérature coloniale* (Dreaming of Asia: Exoticism and Colonial Literature) (Paris: EHESS, 1993) and Claudine Salmon (ed.), *Récits de voyage des Asiatiques: genres, mentalités, conception de l’espace* (Asian Travelogues: Genres, Mentalities, Conceptions of Space) (Paris: EFEO/EHESS, 1996).

<sup>66</sup> I will treat the subject of French and Vietnamese perceptions of *non-colonial* modernisation in Thailand and Japan elsewhere.

<sup>67</sup> Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (eds), *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>68</sup> Like Siam at the time, Vietnam could have developed without the direct colonisation of France, or else under the aegis of another European power. France was never destined to colonise Vietnam. For more about Thailand, see the excellent article by Thongchai Winichakul, ‘The quest for “Siwilai”’, pp. 528–549.

<sup>69</sup> A type of modernising globalisation that even France has not escaped in the face of other ‘imperialisms’ or ‘mondialisations’. See: Hubert Védrine and Dominique Moisi, *Les cartes de la France à l’heure de la mondialisation* (France in an Age of Globalisation) (Paris: Fayard, 2000; English translation, Washington: Brookings Institution, 2003).



or to speak French with his Vietnamese friends may have been more than showing off or a symbolic desire to be French instead of Vietnamese.<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, many Vietnamese, not least of all Nguyen Van Vinh and Pham Quynh, took the French discourse on civilization which had so troubled them, linked it to a pre-existing Vietnamese sense of regional cultural superiority, and came up with their own discourse of civilisational superiority in relation to the Lao, the Khmer and other colonised ethnic groups sharing Indochina with them. For constructing a discourse on civilisation also meant having favorable comparisons to lesser developed peoples.<sup>71</sup> While France justified her domination over Vietnam by the superiority of Western civilisation and modernity, Nguyen Van Vinh and others defended their French-favoured position in colonial Indochina by arguing that they were more 'modern', 'advanced' and 'progressive' than the other Indochinese members. This gave the Vietnamese a privileged place within the Franco-Vietnamese development of colonial Indochina and allowed them to say that they were superior to those much needed 'others'.<sup>72</sup> In response to a Khmer nationalist's opposition to Vietnamese immigration to Cambodia, the *Annam nouveau* responded that the Vietnamese had come to Cambodia for the same Darwinist reasons that the Europeans had gone into Asia and the Japanese into Manchuria in 1931: 'Unless the Cambodians want to remain isolated like savages in central Africa, it is in their interest to receive with open arms all the messengers of civilisation [meaning the Vietnamese]. Such does not seem to be the way of thinking of several of them [the Cambodians]'.<sup>73</sup> This complex idea of civilisation clearly cut in

<sup>70</sup> A very pertinent analysis of this complex question of civilisation was done by Norbert Elias, *Civilisation des mœurs*. That said, it would be interesting to know what Vietnamese, Chinese, Koreans and other Asians sent to the European fronts of WWI thought of this butchery. Clearly, Elias' view of a progressive amelioration of Western civilisation had regressed barbarically. See: Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: retrouver la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), pp. 44-50. Nguyen Van Vinh was in France during WWI, interpreting for Vietnamese soldiers. I do not know if this contradiction struck him. It does not seem so.

<sup>71</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, 'The quest for "Siwilai"', pp. 528-549. Alexander Woodside, again, has some illuminating thoughts on earlier periods of Vietnamese history. Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 235.

<sup>72</sup> For Pham Quynh and Nguyen Van Vinh's thinking on this matter, see: Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina?*

<sup>73</sup> Hy Tong, 'Que se passe-t-il au Cambodge?' (What is happening in Cambodia?), *AN* (20 August 1933); and also Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina?*

many directions. And how the French colonial discourse hooked up with more ancient Vietnamese notions of civilising missions is one of its more interesting offshoots. The other, of course, was the modernist communist ideology young Vietnamese spread in their revolutionary missions in Laos and Cambodia, and this well into the 1950s.<sup>74</sup> This hierarchic Western conceptualising of civilisation might seem absurd in this day of ‘Asian values’ and ‘clash of civilisations’. However, it was a real concern for many at the time and a complex cultural process that merits much greater attention, even today.

Interestingly, just as unfortunate misunderstandings between Vietnamese and the Khmer weakened the Vietnamese civilising discourse in western Indochina, so too did ‘Franco-Annamese collaboration’ suffer from colonial encounters pointing up the inherent inequality between the coloniser and colonised, civilised or not. One such incident (it was not the first one for Nguyen Van Vinh) came to the fore in 1933, when a fight broke out between Vietnamese and French movie-goers in the Cinéma Majestic. Nguyen Van Vinh lamented this painful incident in print, arguing implicitly that it stemmed from a form of colonial racism. He asked everyone to consider all sides of the issue before pinning the blame on the Vietnamese simply because they were Vietnamese. He asked the French to abandon their colonial superiority, which was at the root of this sort of humiliating problem.<sup>75</sup> But what really hurt Nguyen Van Vinh was that shortly after the publication of his article, he received an official warning from the colonial government accusing him of being ‘anti-French’ in his writings on this incident.<sup>76</sup> Vinh could not understand such an unfair label: ‘By golly, it is a handy term, and clever is he who will come and give us a definition of the word *anti-French*’. He finished by saying that ‘the day when all the French living here will accept that all malice be punished, from wherever it comes, even from a Frenchman; that the Annamese are also human beings; that they must react individually to unjust aggressions; and that in so doing they will have all good Frenchmen with them, then on that day Franco-Vietnamese collaboration will cease to be a meaningless term’.<sup>77</sup> Colonial ‘civilisation’ thus had serious con-

<sup>74</sup> For more on this subject, see my ‘Vietnam and the world outside: the case of Vietnamese Communist advisors in Laos (1948–1962)’, *South East Asia Research*, in press. Communist Vietnamese modernisers were well aware of the civilising discourse of Nguyen Van Vinh regarding Western Indochina. See: *Van Kien Dang*, Vol. II (Party Documents) (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Su That, 1977), pp. 476–477.

<sup>75</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, ‘*Autour d’un incident pénible*’ (On a painful incident), *AN* (15 June 1933).

<sup>76</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, ‘*Antifrançais*’ (Anti-French), *AN* (27 August 1933).

<sup>77</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, ‘*Rapprochement*’ (Reconciliation), *AN* (6 July 1933).

traditions, precisely because the French and the Vietnamese were not equal. And Nguyen Van Vinh knew it.

Nevertheless, Vinh's conviction that the modernisation of Vietnam could only happen via an alliance with the French corresponded with the official colonial credo. And this concordance facilitated French efforts to 'associate' Vietnamese like him to the French colonial project in Indochina, especially since the French were not the only ones who wanted to gain the confidence of the Vietnamese.

*Nguyen Van Vinh and the Colonial Roots of French Francophonie*

French civilisation was not the only choice available to the Vietnamese during the colonial period. And French colonial administrators of the time were perfectly aware of this.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the desire of the French to accelerate this cultural influence in Vietnam after World War I stemmed from the fear that their culture and ideas were *not* reaching enough Vietnamese elites and certainly not the masses. In fact, they worried that other cultures, both the Chinese and Anglo-German ones, could exert potentially greater influence over the Vietnamese. And the French decision to bet on Nguyen Van Vinh is the best proof of this.

Governor-General Albert Sarraut (mandates: 1911–1913, 1917–1919) and his director of political affairs, Louis Marty, were determined to prevent German propaganda and Chinese influence from reaching the Vietnamese elite via Chinese translations and Chinese cultural bonds that continued to link Vietnam to the outside world in spite of the French colonial state. Sarraut informed the Ministry of Colonies that Asians in general and Vietnamese in particular still knew little about France: 'English being the only European language that is widely used in the Far East', he wrote, 'editors of Chinese books in Shanghai and other ports can only find good translators for this language among their compatriots'. By extension, the Chinese translations that continued to make their way into Vietnam did not spread information about France, but rather about other European countries, the British and the Germans.

Sarraut was shocked to learn that much of what the Vietnamese knew about the world and Europe still came from non-French publications, like Kang Youwei's (K'ang-Yeou-Wei) multi-volume account of his voyage to Europe. To support his argument, Sarraut cited a

<sup>78</sup> See: McHale, *Print and Power*, Chapter 1.

report from the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient penned by Noël Péri in 1911 on the exams taken by the mandarins. This report revealed that the French were not the 'masters of public opinion'. Péri and others explained that Chinese publications still loomed large on the shelves of local mandarin libraries in upper Vietnam. More worrying, 'the works of K'ang-Yeou-Wei continued to be in great demand and circulated throughout the colony, despite the prohibitions that had imposed a ban on all Chinese pamphlets, whatever they be'.<sup>79</sup> The translation into Chinese of scores of German works only reinforced these fears during World War I.

This was the context within which Sarraut and a remarkable team of Vietnamese specialists recruited *francophone* intellectuals like Pham Quynh, Bui Quang Chieu, and Nguyen Van Vinh to promote French works in Indochina and weaken foreign influences on this Vietnamese 'public opinion' still operating outside of French colonial control. Sarraut's team placed these Vietnamese at the head of major government-backed newspapers, such as the *Nam phong* for Pham Quynh, *La tribune indigène* for Bui Quang Chieu and *Dong duong tap chi* and then the *Trung bac tan van* for Nguyen Van Vinh. Sarraut relied in particular on Marty and Schneider to implement a 'methodical plan' to sever Vietnam from its Asian context and to block non-French influences from reaching Vietnamese elites. Instead they were to favour the promotion of French cultural projects in Indochina. The French wanted to make French culture, literature, modernisation, and civilisation known to the Vietnamese, and, most importantly, *in Vietnamese*. Sarraut's team needed quickly to fill in the gap of 'incomprehension' that separated these two peoples, as Vayrac's opening citation to this article pointed up.

Even after the war, the importance of making modern France known in Asia and in Vietnam remained a colonial priority. Marty reminded Sarraut in March 1919 that, 'in modern Chinese literature, books inspired by post eighteenth century French works, or translations of them, are extremely rare. In contrast, the Far East is overflowing with books on all subjects translated from English or from German.' Marty hailed Sarraut's decision to 'create and develop in collaboration with M. Schneider, French propaganda organs written in the national Annamese language and which have immediately won over public favour. These are the organs which need to be maintained while simultaneously completing the organisation of our propaganda

<sup>79</sup> 'Le Gouverneur-Général de l'Indochine à M. le Ministre des Colonies' (The Governor General of Indochina to the Minister of Colonies), 15 September 1917, Collection Indochine, Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine, 65409, CAOM.

institutions'. For Marty, these propaganda institutions had to function 'in an independent manner in appearance, but under the very close control of the Government of the Colony and its local administrations'. It was imperative, he said, that they 'inform and instruct'. In short, they were designed above all to make France known to the Vietnamese and in their language, as well as French modernity and culture and the importance of the *mère patrie* in the world. What was needed was an official propaganda outlet for the colonised:

Our subjects and protégés need to have at their disposal an informational paper, one which can inform them precisely, with explicative commentaries that satisfy their legitimate curiosity, without any unwholesome or tendentious insinuations, about the overall situation of the country as well as external affairs. It is also necessary that the government be able to bring about, through intelligent advertising, the preparation of a number of administrative measures and reforms that will be even better accepted [by the Vietnamese masses] in that they will have been well explained and better understood. This organ [...] must have an essentially educative role. It must allow the indigenous [Vietnamese] to understand the utility and the intensity of the immense labour that is being done for their own good. They must also learn to always know better France, her generous ideas, the works of her thinkers and philosophers. It must in a word contribute to bringing them to realize very clearly that the protecting Nation [France] is not taking them for a ride. If it is sufficiently developed, it must work to create imperceptibly a genuine public spirit.<sup>80</sup>

The colonial state needed Nguyen Van Vinh. Vayrac, a censor of the press in Tonkin, had recruited Nguyen Van Vinh for this project and was one of his close friends. In 1937, he explained the basis of this French propaganda and the role of Nguyen Van Vinh in it in an internal report entitled: 'The efforts undertaken in Tonkin over the previous twenty-five years to furnish good reading to the Annamese'. If we can believe Vayrac, well before World War I, Nguyen Van Vinh had actually been more interested in translating the works of eighteenth century French political thinkers than the comedies of Molière and the satires of the preceding century. Vayrac did not hide the fact that Vinh had first 'translated those French philosophers who paved the way for the Revolution. We came to believe that he had made six or seven successive translations of the *Contrat social*, which circulated in secret'. Vayrac did his best 'in conversations to persuade [Nguyen Van Vinh] that these were not the works he should translate

<sup>80</sup> 'L. Marty à M. Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine' (L. Marty to the Governor General of Indochina), 3 March 1919, Collection Indochine, Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine, d. 65407, CAOM. See also: Agathe Larcher-Goscha, 'La légitimation française en Indochine', Vol. I, pp. 122–131.

first, for the Annamese, in their present state of evolution, could not gain any benefit from them'. Vayrac claimed to have 'taken years to convince M. Vinh that he should start with books which were universally admired and translated into all languages, like the *Fables* of La Fontaine and Perrault's *Contes*'.<sup>81</sup> It is clear that Nguyen Van Vinh did not choose all the Western works he translated. It is clear, too, that the French did not want the revolutionary side of their national literature and cultural patrimony to be distributed in Vietnamese for fear of the challenges it could pose to their colonial rule. The major cultural works of the seventeenth century were apparently much more appropriate for the colonised. There were thus limits on which parts of French francophone literature could be broadcast in the colonies in a time of colonisation.

Vayrac explained that Vinh had already founded and run several periodicals in *quoc ngu* and in Chinese characters; that he had briefly run the *Imprimerie tonkinoise*; and that he had even been determined to publish a newspaper in *quoc ngu*, without colonial authorization, 'in order to get himself arrested and cause a scandal'. It was at this point that Vayrac stepped in and managed to convince Vinh to move one step closer to him and to the colonial government, which recognised that 'there was a force to be used [in Nguyen Van Vinh], but in an orderly and legal way'. This overture to Nguyen Van Vinh coincided with Sarraut's desire to put an end to foreign cultural and political influences in Vietnamese minds by promoting French culture and civilisation via the Vietnamese language itself. Nguyen Van Vinh was their man for upper Vietnam. Since Sarraut's first mandate, Schneider and Vinh had already worked together to run the *Dong Duong Tap Chi*, and then moved on to the *Trung Bac Tan Van*. Vayrac stated clearly that, 'M. Vinh had finally found his calling. He would become the translator of the great works of French literature'. Working under Sarraut since the Governor General's first mandate, Schneider had promoted French propaganda (that was the word) through the use of *quoc ngu*. After World War I, this program would continue in French and in Vietnamese in order to reach the massive non-French-speaking Vietnamese readership. Louis Marty took over from Schneider after the war.

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<sup>81</sup> 'Rapport au sujet des efforts faits au Tonkin depuis vingt-cinq ans environ pour fournir de bonnes lectures aux Annamites' (Report on the efforts undertaken in Tonkin over the previous twenty-five years to provide good reading for the Annamese), 17 February 1937, signed E. Vayrac, Chef du Bureau des Publications Indigènes, RSTF/NF, d. 05219, CAOM.

Indeed, the role given to Nguyen Van Vinh in the promotion of French culture in Vietnamese was primarily due to the French fear of seeing 'Asian opinion' grow to their detriment in Vietnam, especially if it was manipulated by other Western powers (like the Germans during the World War I). There is thus a political side to Nguyen Van Vinh's cultural and literary career that cannot be ignored. Looking back on this period in 1931, Nguyen Van Vinh explained that his role had been to contribute to the development of a Vietnamese public sphere, since it was true that 'Chinese language newspapers, if not dealing specifically with Annamese issues, still engendered an Asian opinion with regard to the European imperialist powers'.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, well after World War I, Chinese characters continued to occupy an important place among Vietnamese intellectuals, writers and even readers. Until the end of the 1920s, for example, the French used Nguyen Van Vinh to 'fight against the invasion of Chinese novels' by creating for him the translation and publishing collection, *Lectures Tonkinoises*. In 1927 and 1928, Résident Supérieur René Robin founded the *Almanach annamite* and the collection of translations *La pensée de l'occident* already mentioned with exactly the same idea in mind. Robin put Vinh at the head of both collections and each was financed by the colonial state. However, severing the link with the Chinese-influenced world was not going to be an easy task. Into the 1930s, according to Vayrac, many Vietnamese continued to read Chinese almanacs printed in Guangzhou or Shanghai. They were, Vayrac claimed, published in the 'hundreds of thousands and undoubtedly millions of copies'. A large number of these Chinese almanacs sold in Indochina for as little as ten or twelve cents. Vayrac explained in his report that 'only the administration [could] finance an affair that appear[ed] in such disastrous conditions'. The French administration bought and distributed most of Nguyen Van Vinh's almanacs in the course of this politico-cultural war, while *La pensée de l'occident* published 65,000 volumes of translations, and 1,800,000 short pamphlet translations, of which one million were distributed free thanks to the colonial state.<sup>83</sup>

The pre-existing Asian context underpinning Vietnamese civilisation would not disappear overnight. Unable to make themselves understood by the Vietnamese 'masses', colonial administrators had

<sup>82</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, 'La presse indigène libre', *AN* (20 April, 1931).

<sup>83</sup> From the 'Rapport au sujet des efforts faits au Tonkin' pp. 9–11. 'In all, *La Pensée de l'Occident* published 1,800,000 pamphlets of excellent translations, of which 1,000,000 were distributed free of charge, and 65,000 volumes.' These numbers seem wildly exaggerated.

to redouble their efforts to promote French culture and progress. In other words, colonial Westernisation had its limits, as Denys Lombard has correctly pointed out, even for the French in Indochina.<sup>84</sup> This is why knowledge of France, its language and the transmission of its works in eastern Indochina had to be carried out as much in French as in Vietnamese. And this is what made both *translation* and *Nguyen Van Vinh* such powerful tools for diffusing colonial propaganda and ideology.<sup>85</sup> Vayrac, who knew the situation from the inside, conceded as much, as we saw in the introductory citation to this article. And this is why he felt even greater sadness upon learning of the death of his close friend, Nguyen Van Vinh. One cannot deny the effects of French culture and language in Vietnam during the colonial era, especially in the cities and among the youth who were much more versed in French by the 1930s. However, one cannot claim either that the French language and culture immediately took hold in colonial Vietnam by displacing pre-existing forms, for it did not.<sup>86</sup> The French decision to develop a colonial *francophonie* project emerged precisely because Vietnamese knowledge of the French, their culture, and their *oeuvres* was not sufficiently developed and broadcast, and because the French were not the only ones competing for Vietnamese hearts and minds. French colonisers (like their British and Japanese counterparts elsewhere) badly needed ‘Nguyen Van Vinhs’ to ‘bridge this total incomprehension’ between two different peoples, to counter competing influences to the French colonial presence, and to anchor French colonisation and civilisation in a foreign soil, one with a foundation in Asia and not in the West. Colonial modernity was complex; nor was its success a foregone conclusion. And culture was also a weapon. Nguyen Van Vinh knew this, too.

<sup>84</sup> Denys Lombard, *Le carrefour javanais, I: les limites de l'occidentalisation* (The Javanese Crossroads, I: The Limits of Westernisation), introduction.

<sup>85</sup> Paradoxically, Vinh perhaps did more to spread French culture in Vietnam during the colonial era than later francophone Vietnamese writers would do during the period of decolonisation. The fact that he introduced French language and culture into Vietnam in the Vietnamese language and not in French is perhaps why Nguyen Van Vinh, even to this day, does not appear in the histories of French ‘*francophonie*’, which were more concerned with works in the French language. The case of Nguyen Van Vinh suggests that the dissemination of French culture and language in Vietnam came through other means than, *justement*, the French language itself.

<sup>86</sup> Even less so in Laos and Cambodia, where we find relatively little French influence and little interest in this modernity of which Nguyen Van Vinh and so many other Vietnamese dreamt.



*Conclusion*

It seems, however, that Nguyen Van Vinh was caught somewhere between the past and the present towards the end of his life, not knowing exactly which path to take in the end. The fact that he was financially destitute did not make things easier. Vinh still believed in Western modernisation and in the concomitant development of a new Vietnamese civilisation. Indeed, he provides us with a good example of someone who conceived of the modernisation of Vietnam in colonial terms, and illustrates the difficulties that arise with such a position. In the early 1930s, when Chiang Kai-shek turned to 'traditional' Confucian cultural politics in opposition to the hyper-Westernisation then in fashion in urban China, Nguyen Van Vinh responded in an essay that it would indeed be necessary to renovate and develop a new and modern form of Confucianism in Vietnam, a sort of state ideology, but one which would be closely linked to 'scientific progress'. Confucianism, Vinh stressed, would make a great contribution to Asian peoples because it contained the merit of allowing 'extraordinary stability'.<sup>87</sup> He would never have said that twenty years earlier, but then again the Indochinese colony had just been rocked by nationalist revolts in 1930 and 1931 and a large fraction of increasingly Westernised Vietnamese youths were defecting to more radical politics—nationalism and communism being the most important.

Ironically, French colonial administrators who felt deeply Vietnamese after decades in Vietnam would try to push tradition and authenticity long before they were forced to under Vichy. Shaken by the nationalist rebellions of 1930 and worried by what he saw as a young generation of 'uprooted' Westernised Vietnamese (*déracinés*), Pierre Pasquier turned towards the past, towards the *Annam d'autrefois* (Annam of yesteryear), when he began to bring back Confucianism and the monarchy, whose power and authority the French had themselves undermined. This occurred as young Vietnamese, under the impetus of Nguyen Van Vinh and others, were demanding new political institutions, more Western in style, to create a *Nouveau Annam* and a real national culture. One should not be surprised to find that Vinh

<sup>87</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, '*Mouvement de la nouvelle vie en Chine*' (The New Life movement in China), *AN* (11 October 1934).

and others were enthusiastic supporters of the Siamese revolution of 1932 and the fall of the absolute monarchy there in favour of a 'salutary democracy'.<sup>88</sup>

This tension between 'modernisation' and 'Westernisation' on the one hand and the need to rethink 'tradition' and 'authenticity' on the other was not unique to Vietnam. The difference is that in the context of French colonial domination, of censorship and surveillance, Vietnamese intellectuals did not have the real chance to 'nationalize' these borrowings from the West, like their Japanese or Thai neighbors could. The Vietnamese did not run their own country independently, since the French had claimed that role for themselves. Nguyen Van Vinh could not become an independent minister of culture in Vietnam like the famous Vichit Vathakan in Thailand. There could be no Japanese *kokugaku* let alone *kokutai* in colonial Vietnam, because such nationalist policies, even in cultural forms, would have inevitably been tagged as *anti-français*.<sup>89</sup> The 'nationalising' of Western modernity in Vietnam similar to that in Japan or in Thailand could not fully take place until colonial control had been relaxed or overthrown. Nguyen Van Vinh seems to have grasped this conundrum towards the end of his life.

But by the early 1930s, for all of his self-assurance and zeal, Nguyen Van Vinh did not know really which way to turn. Broke and sidelined by the French with the resurrection of the monarchy, Nguyen Van Vinh was tired and perhaps increasingly bitter. Let us end this study of a complex character placed within a complex colonial situation by giving him the last word. Perhaps he will be better able to reveal to us the nature of the dilemma of colonial modernity. In 1934, he wrote to the reformist scholar Huynh Thuc Khang of his predicament. He used the third person to reflect on his personal odyssey:

It is the gulf separating the real scholar that I am but who no longer believes in the ideas and the methods of the past from that of the modern barbarian I believe myself to be. The product of a mixed and incomplete education, I tried to find something real in this same past, one which I certainly do not know as well as M. Huynh Thuc Khang. The [latter] appeared nonetheless to me as an unsuspecting source of life and light. We crossed paths on the same road and each of us claims

<sup>88</sup> 'La leçon de la révolution siamoise' (The lesson of the Siamese revolution), *AN* (3 July 1932).

<sup>89</sup> One has to applaud the new Alliance Française in Hanoi for organising in the summer of 2003 and to a packed house a reading of one of Nguyen Huy Thiep's latest novels—in Vietnamese and French and with Nguyen Huy Thiep centre-stage. Nguyen Van Vinh dreamed of such a day.

to be on the right path precisely because it is not yet known. But since, after all, we are both going in search of the truth, it is not imperative that we have to take the same road.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh, ‘*Une réponse de M. Huynh-Thuc-Khang*’ (A response to Mr Huynh Thuc Khang), *AN* (22 May 1934). My thanks to Agathe Larcher-Goscha for sharing this document with me.