COLONIAL MISREPRESENTATION OF THE “TEA REVOLUTION” IN THE PROVINCE OF PHÚ THỌ (TONKIN), 1920-1945

Olivier Tessier

Translated from the French by Thomas Scott-Railton


2013/1 68th Year | pages 169 - 205

ISSN 2268-3763
ISBN 9782713223693

This document is the English version of:


The English version of this issue is published thanks to the support of the CNRS

Available online at:

https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_ANNA_681_0169--colonial-misrepresentation-of-the.htm

How to cite this article:


Electronic distribution by Cairn on behalf of Editions de l’E.H.E.S.S..
© Editions de l’E.H.E.S.S.. All rights reserved for all countries.
Reproducing this article (including by photocopying) is only authorized in accordance with the general terms and conditions of use for the website, or with the general terms and conditions of the license held by your institution, where applicable. Any other reproduction, in full or in part, or storage in a database, in any form and by any means whatsoever is strictly prohibited without the prior written consent of the publisher, except where permitted under French law.
Colonial Misrepresentation of the “Tea Revolution” in the Province of Phú Thọ (Tonkin), 1920-1945*

Olivier Tessier

“This ‘discovery’ explains how the cultivation of tea, which in monographs and economic studies pre-dating 1935 was still considered a ‘garden’ crop of secondary economic importance, rapidly became a major preoccupation in the province.”

The author’s “discovery” in this 1939 report on the colonization of Phú Thọ province concerned 1,866 illegal tea plantations comprising a total area of five thousand hectares and established on land designated as permanent national forest reserves. This surprising endogenous build-up had occurred unbeknownst to the Tonkin protectorate authorities and outside of the official development plan.

This article was translated from the French by Thomas Scott-Railton, revised by Olivier Tessier, and edited by Nicolas Barreyre, Angela Krieger, and Stephen Sawyer.

* This article is accompanied by documentary material available under the heading “Complementary Reading” on the Annales website: http://annales.ehess.fr.

1. Programme de colonisation dans la province de Phú Thọ, no. 67031, 1939, Fonds de la Résidence supérieure du Tonkin (hereafter “RST”), National Archives of Vietnam (hereafter “NAV”), Hanoi.

2. Most of the territory of Phú Thọ province lies in the “Middle Region” (Trung Du), a hilly region wedged between the Red River Delta—a densely populated area that, up until the early 1990s, was completely dominated by intensive irrigated rice farming—and the mountainous ring of the “High [or Upland] Region,” which was sparsely inhabited and contained around thirty ethnic groups who practiced rice farming in the valley and/or slash-and-burn farming.

3. The protectorate over Tonkin was imposed on the Huế court by the Harmand Treaty of August 23, 1883, which was reaffirmed by the Patenôtre Treaty on June 6, 1884. In contrast to the system of direct subjugation employed in the French colonies—when,
As a result, it is clear why, with the exception of a few notes and reports written after the fact, no official documents made reference to this colonization movement prior to 1935, because, in principle, the colonial administration was unaware of it, and the population and local authorities could not admit to it. While doing fieldwork in several communities of the Thanh Ba district in the late 1990s, I accidentally (re)discovered the existence of this movement, which I named the “tea revolution” in order to highlight the speed and size of a phenomenon that transformed the entire configuration of the region in just a few decades. I say “accidentally” because it was only over the course of interviews with more than thirty villagers retracing their life stories that tea cultivation emerged as the common denominator linking each of these individual—and therefore unique—trajectories. The following two excerpts provide a glimpse of how families, who had for generations lived as rice farmers in large villages built on the hilly banks of the Red River, made the shift toward a more uncertain but nonetheless promising, existence as colonist-planters.

**Map 1: Tonkin Administration (1914)**


for example, Cochinchina became an integrated part of the empire on June 5, 1862 (Treaty of Saigon)—, the political regime in the protectorate did not include a legal transfer of sovereignty over the conquered territories to the occupying power. In the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam, two administrative and judicial systems existed side by side: the Vietnamese-Mandarin system, which extended to the district level in the figure of the *tri huyện* (or *quan huyện*), a Mandarin of the court at Huế; and the central French administration whose decentralized agencies on the political-administrative level extended only as far as the province, with the Résident de France at its head. In reality, colonial power considerably encroached on monarchic prerogatives in Tonkin, which were formally held by the court in Huế, quickly making the protectorate resemble a full-fledged colony.
Map 2: Phú Thọ Province (1939)

Source: After Phạm Xuân Đỗ, Phú Thọ tỉnh địa chí [Geography of Phú Thọ Province] (Hanoi: nxb Tổng Phát hành Nam-Ky, 1939).
My grandfather was the first one to come here over a hundred years ago. At first, he cut wood and brought the logs down to the Sông Thao [River]. Things were easy then, you just had to ask for land from the ly truồng¹ and then clear it. ... After that, my father planted tea and upland rice on the hillsides. But my grandfather and my father did not live here all of the time. They still had a house and rice patties in the community of Và Lăn. I was the first one to settle here. My father then set up a tea plantation (lâm trà) in Đông Linh, the neighboring village. ... Many people from Và Lăn from the Nghiêm, Ma, Mai, Tống, Hà, Định, and Nguyễn lineages started plantations, not just in Thái Ninh, but also in the communities of Ninh Dân, Đông Linh, Đại Lực, Yên Kỹ, Hưởng Xa, and others still.⁵

My parents built a tea plantation (lâm trà) in the commune of Đại An and then in the commune of Đông Linh before I was married over seventy years ago. ... We hired wage laborers for the harvest and drying of the tea and then transported it to Vũ ENTIAL. Merchants from Hà Nội and especially from Phú Thọ came to us directly to buy tea and would ship it by train. ... Along with my wife, we specialized in selling tea. ... For us, business really took off after 1940; before then, we were already selling tea, but in small quantities, 50 to 100 kilos per day, which collectors would buy from us.⁶

While the fact that these events occurred relatively recently makes it possible to explore them through the living memory of the community’s oldest members, their recollections are often filled with gaps and are sometimes confused. In order to go beyond their testimonies and properly situate these biographical fragments in a socio-historical context, I compared the thirty or so interviews that I conducted to written sources of the period, ranging from colonial writing on the development of cash crops in the former Indochina to the colonial archives preserved in the National Archives of Vietnam. Initial investigation of these sources proved disappointing: the village monographs gathered in the “Affaires indigènes” collection, which provide an unprecedented portrait of social history “from the bottom,” end mysteriously for Phú Thọ province sometime between 1923 and 1925. On the other hand, the exploration of two other collections, those of the Résidence de France in Phú Thọ and those of the Résidence Supérieure of Tonkin (RST), were particularly fruitful. What was first intended as ancillary research to supplement my fieldwork became the object of a historical study in its own right. The confrontation between the local realities of the era, as described retrospectively by the villagers, and the facts and explanations provided by the administrative and colonial

---

⁴ No exact translation exists, but the function of the ly truồng can be compared to that of the mayor of a commune. [The commune is the smallest French administrative unit, similar though not identical to a municipality or township in the United States. It is generally headed by a mayor or council.—Trans.]
⁵ Mr. Nguyễn Văn Mân, born in 1927, Thái Ninh commune, interviewed by Olivier Tessier, October 9, 1997.
⁶ Mr. Nguyễn Văn Chạt, born in 1915, Vũ Ện commune, interviewed by Olivier Tessier, August 11 and 15, 1997.
documents revealed many incongruities and contradictions. It was therefore necessary to analyze and then deconstruct the colonial discourse.

“History is an account of events ... it is a narration,” declared Paul Veyne, since “in no case is what historians call an event grasped directly and fully”—or objectively, one is tempted to add. In this respect, the history of the “tea revolution” as it has been reconstructed through colonial documentary sources presents a textbook case. It reveals the way in which the administration of the protectorate closed itself off and walled itself in by conscientiously denying reality. It reflects the arrogance that is unique to those who hold iniquitous power, which causes them to misappropriate with impunity not only the resources of the colonized country but also the adaptive and innovative capacities of the country’s people. The narrative of this manipulation lies at the heart of this article.

A Short History of Tea in Phú Thọ Province: Vain Enthusiasm

The first reference to tea cultivation in Tonkin appears in a twenty-page note written by Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis in 1892. The author firmly sides with the supporters of the colonization of Tonkin, justified by the immense market potential of its powerful northern neighbor, China. Arguing that “we have allowed Chinese merchants to monopolize” the trade in rice, which was the source of Cochinchina’s prosperity, he believed that “the cultivation of tea, which has spread from China to Indochina and Java and has taken on a new form, deserves our particular attention, because in our Indochinese possessions, where this product is appreciated by the natives, the cultivation and sale of tea could become very profitable for us.” This credo was eventually adopted by all colonial specialists, predominantly agricultural engineers. Up through the end of the 1930s, they advanced an assertive and militant discourse in favor of the rapid development of tea cultivation. Their argument hinged on satisfying the combined demand of the internal Indochinese market and the markets in the metropole and the North African colonies.

According to the numbers provided by Henri Brénier in 1914, the annual tonnage exported to France in the period covering 1898-1902 (138 metric tons) had doubled by 1903-1907 (238 metric tons), before reaching 314 metric tons between 1908 and 1912. However, this undeniable growth in exports should not

Map 3: Thanh Ba District (1939)

Source: After Programme de colonisation dans la province de Phú Thọ, no. 67503, 1938-1939, RST, NAV, Hanoi.
mask the still relatively small scale of commercial production. During the period between 1908-1912, less than 10% of the 4,030 metric tons imported annually by France—two-thirds of which were destined for North Africa—came from Indochina. In addition to this, each year it was necessary to import 1,000-1,200 metric tons of tea from China into Indochina.

The statistics compiled by Philippe Eberhardt and Maurice Aufray four years later indicated that a shift in the global center of gravity had begun by the mid-1910s. But the dynamics were very different in the three countries that make up present-day Vietnam: Annam (Central Vietnam) became an exporter, and Tonkin (North Vietnam) was progressively approaching a relative balance between import and export, while Cochinchina (South Vietnam) remained a significant importer, accounting for three-quarters of the total volume of imported tea.11 In Tonkin, the authors specify that most of the “natives” operating plantations for more than just domestic consumption were in the Middle Region. Several years earlier, Brénier noticed a similar form of localization in tea production: the only two “regions of abundant cultivation aimed for export” were located on the right bank of the Red River in the Cát Trù region and on the left bank in the Thanh Ba district.12 The geographical proximity of these two zones was not a coincidence: the enthusiasm for tea cultivation in Thanh Ba was an outgrowth of the expansion of plantations in Cát Trù.

The story begins on the right bank of the Red River during the last years of colonial conquest (1883-1895) with the creation of the Société des thé Chaffanjon in the Càm Khê district: “Among these early pioneers, one should pay special attention to Paul Chaffanjon, who, beginning in 1890, settled in Phú Thọ province and by his own efforts succeeded in creating a plantation that continues to turn a handsome profit.”13 The emblematic role of this first colonial business can be attributed to the fact that “even if these plantations only encompassed a few hectares, they drew their importance from the processing of additional locally-grown teas.”14 Furthermore, the quality of the tea was “closer to French tastes,” which was a good sign for the expansion of a market that was responding to colonial demand.15 The originality of this enterprise lay in its ability to transform and process the products collected from the “natives” into black tea. This approach had been adopted at the outset and therefore also determined the actual location of the business, since a large number of tea trees already existed in the Càm Khê district prior to the colonist’s arrival.

12. Brénier, Essai d’atlas statistique, 166, map XXXVI.
Although the reputation of Hưng Hóa province (an enormous province surrounding the province of Phú Thọ)\textsuperscript{16} had been well-established since the beginning of the twentieth century, the evolution of commercial production quickly led to a shortage of raw materials.\textsuperscript{17} This resulted in tension and jealousy among purchasers, as documented by the following request from the lỳ trưòng of the commune of Mạn Lạn addressed to the Résident de France in Phú Thọ, dated September 29, 1908:

\textit{Last year, when the individual named Phóng was the lỳ trưòng, Monsieur the concession holder of Tinh Cuông [Mr. Chaffanjon] met with him on the subject of the sale of tea but I do not know whether or not my predecessor promised to sell him all of the tea planted in the commune. I have held this office since July and I have seen the servants of Mr. Lafeuille [merchant] from Hà Nội come to our commune to buy our tea. Several days later, Monsieur the planter from Tinh Cuông went to see the quan huyện and gave him the order to chase off these individuals. This is what I tried to do, but they refused to leave my village. As these two colonists are men of high standing, they accused me of preventing the inhabitants from selling their tea.}\textsuperscript{18}

Frightened by the idea of having to arbitrate a conflict between two French colonists, the lỳ trưòng asked the Résident de France to repair what he deemed “this injustice.” In the margins of this request, the Résident noted that the lỳ trưòng had nothing to worry about because “this disagreement falls under the jurisdiction of the French courts” and added that “if the tea producers have engagements with Mr. Chaffanjon, then they must keep them. If not, they are free to sell their tea to whomever they please. As for the rest of it, Mr. Chaffanjon offers to rent these

\textsuperscript{16} In 1891, the province of Hưng Hóa was completely restructured by Gouverneur Général Jean-Marie de Lannessan’s decree no. 541 (September 8, 1891), and its capital was moved to the city of Phú Thọ on May 5, 1903. In 1905, the colonial authorities remapped the northern provinces of Tonkin. Out of sections of territory from Sơn Tây, Hưng Hóa, and Thái Nguyên provinces, they created three new provinces: Phú Thọ, Vĩnh Yên, and Phú Lộ. See Lê Tường and Vũ Kim Biên, Lịch sử Vĩnh Phú [History of Vĩnh Phú Province] (Việt Trì: nxb Văn hóa và Thông tin Vĩnh Phú, 1980), 128.

\textsuperscript{17} The historical presence of plantations was the reason behind a series of requests for the shipment of seeds that were addressed to the Résident de France in Hưng Hóa. On October 3, 1901, the Résident de France in Thái Nguyên asked for tea seeds for French planters and received eighty baskets. On December 7, 1901, the Résident de France in Bắc Ninh requested the shipment of ten to fifteen kilos of seeds after the Résident Supérieur of Tonkin had informed him that he had a stockpile of forty kilos. And on December 1, 1902, the director of the Botanical Gardens made a similar request, noting that “there is an abundance of tea trees in the region that you administer.” “Culture alimentaire, le théier,” N 45, no. 1151, 1900-1905, Fonds de la province de Phú Thọ, NAV, Hanoi. [In the French colonial system, “Résidents” were government officials who lived on-site in colonial protectorates.—Trans.]

\textsuperscript{18} “Affaires indigènes, village de Mạn Lạn,” no. 714, 1893-1910, Fonds de la province de Phú Thọ, NAV, Hanoi.
lands, which is his right.” From this point on, the imbalance between supply and demand spurred the development of tea cultivation, leading to its spread from its initial location in the commune of Thái Ninh to every hillside village in the Thanh Ba district. In 1928, Jean Goubeaux identified a second major center of production in the Cát Trù zone, which he called the “tea gardens of Thái Ninh.”

The second, modeled on the tea gardens of phủ Yên Bình [Tuyên-Quang] is only eight to ten years old .... These gardens were not built by locals indigenous to Thái Ninh, but rather by emigrants from the village of_Man Lân. They cultivated tea in their village, but after a while the topsoil was worn away by erosion and so they emigrated and settled in Thái Ninh. A Chinese merchant, mentioned above, encouraged them and advanced them funds. He sends the dried tea to Tourane [Da Nang]. 120 to 150 metric tons are exported from Thái Ninh and Cát Trù in this manner every year.

Field research confirms these claims. The current inhabitants of the commune of Thái Ninh are in fact descendants of these “colonist-planters” from Man Lân, a commune located about fifteen kilometers away on the Red River. The aforementioned conflict attests to its plantation tradition. The pioneers who arrived starting in 1915 were therefore not amateurs, for they already had experience and technical know-how, which helped them settle and limited their risks. More importantly, in a region characterized by a low population density, they developed a novel form of colonization, which the peasants named di đi – cè cè (literally meaning “back and forth”) and which some people continued to practice up through the agricultural reforms of 1953-1954. They built farms and camps (làmträj) along untouched hillsides that had not previously been used for agriculture. Each colonist built a house there, while retaining a residence and an economic activity—principally rice farming—in his village of origin. This dual mode of residence and production, made possible by the geographical proximity of the two areas, progressively became the centerpiece of a veritable “plantation economy,” the expansion of this economy transformed the entire landscape of the region over the next four decades.

The colonial authorities quickly perceived the benefits to be reaped from developing tea cultivation. To pursue this ambition, the experimental agricultural station at Phú Hộ was inaugurated in 1918, taking the place of the Thanh Ba station, which had been closed in 1911. “Beginning in 1918, tea increasingly
attracted the attention of agricultural circles. The experimental agriculture and forestry station of Phú Hồ in Tonkin was created specifically for the purpose of studying tea.”

Yves Henri, inspector general of agriculture in the colonies, who was extremely vocal about what he viewed as the uselessness of such research institutions, made a notable exception in the case of tea: “The inanity of these attempts quickly became apparent for most crops, with the exception of the tea tree, which has been the subject of well-conducted experimentation, and has yielded a harvest of 500 to 550 kilos of dried tea per adult plant, thanks to constant fertilization of the soil.”

However, and this is a recurring theme, the experimentation conducted by the Phú Hồ station, like the recommendations put forward by the different specialists, was undertaken exclusively with large-scale plantations in mind, those directed by French colonists and requiring heavy capital investment. Thus, for Paul Braemer, “over the next decade, nothing will stand in the way of establishing ten to twelve industrial tea-producing enterprises in Tonkin, which would be able to cultivate 3,000 to 4,000 hectares of land and produce 2,000 metric tons of saleable tea annually, roughly a quarter of the metropole’s demand. The capital necessary to accomplish this, about 3 to 3.5 million piasters, could easily be obtained from within the colony itself.” For this reason, the locally initiated development of tea cultivation was completely overlooked for almost two decades. This denial of reality logically followed the reigning positivism, in which belief in the inaccessible superiority of rational Western thought became even more unshakeable through a colonial relationship of domination founded on the exploitation of the colonized peoples and a negation of their local knowledge. That said, the clueless self-absorption from which the colonial authorities and these authors suffered is still a little surprising. Take, for example, the agronomic study of Phú Thọ province published in 1928 by Goubeaux. After having examined the “investments likely to interest European capital,” the author selected the cultivation of tea as the most profitable: “We can estimate that the size of the territory suited for the cultivation of tea and Excelsa is around 40,000 hectares between the Red River, the Black River, and the Sông Cha; 3,000 hectares to the east of the Clear River; and 2,000 to the north of the Sông Cha, making a total of 45,000 hectares.”

What happened to these plans for French industrial plantations, which could rival—both in terms of the quality of the tea produced and the costs of cultivation—the region’s great tea-producing countries (China, Ceylon, Japan, the British and
Dutch Indies) even as French planters, principally in Annam, were failing miserably?27 The numbers compiled ten years later by Robert Du Pasquier are telling and definitive.

### Table 1: Tea Plantations in 1938

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Size of Indigenous Plantations</th>
<th>Size of European Plantations</th>
<th>Indigenous Production (in metric tons)</th>
<th>European Production (in metric tons)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tonkin in 1938</strong></td>
<td>5,604 ha</td>
<td>90 ha</td>
<td>2,800 tn.</td>
<td>30 tn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phú Thọ alone</strong></td>
<td>2,240 ha</td>
<td>60 ha</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annam in 1938</strong></td>
<td>4,287 ha</td>
<td>2,759 ha</td>
<td>2,200 tn.</td>
<td>900 tn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cochinchina in 1938</strong></td>
<td>565 ha</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>170 tn.</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total per category</strong></td>
<td>10,456 ha</td>
<td>2,849 ha</td>
<td>5,170 tn.</td>
<td>930 tn.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total** 13,305 hectares 6,100 tons

*Source: Du Pasquier, La production du thé en Indochine, 2.*

In 1938, not only did the size of European plantations in Tonkin remain insignificant, but, ironically, the sixty hectares listed for Phú Thọ province belonged to the Société Chaffanjon. Nothing had changed since 1890. The increase in production was quite substantial, and it occurred despite the disastrous impact of the 1929 crisis on the living conditions of peasants28 and the global overproduction of tea.29 All of the credit should go to the “natives,” who, within two decades, made Phú Thọ province the most important area for tea production in Indochina.

27. “50,000 hectares of tea and coffee bushes were abandoned by French planters between 1926 and 1931; the area of cultivated land stabilized at 2,950 [hectares].” André Guinard, “La culture du thé en Indochine” (1953), cited by Brocheux, *Une histoire économique du Viet Nam*, 86.

28. In the mid-1920s, the situation of the peasantry in the Red River Delta worsened. Local mechanisms of regulation, notably the periodic redistribution of communal lands, and revenue created by a large and dynamic sector of traditional artisans were no longer enough to counteract the increasing pauperization of the peasantry and the growing number of landless peasants. But it was only following the international crisis of 1929 and its impact on the colonial economy, and therefore on the colonized peoples, that the attitude of the protectorate’s authorities began to change. The “policy of aid for the rice paddies,” launched between 1931-1932, aimed to equip the Red River Delta with hydraulic infrastructure that could expand the bi-annual rice harvest while simultaneously reducing congestion in the most densely populated provinces through the organization of migratory movements toward the underpopulated areas of Central and South Vietnam. See Olivier Tessier and Jean-Philippe Fontenelle, “Pression démographique et contraintes publiques: la paysannerie nord vietnamienne dans la tourmente du XXe siècle,” in *Population et développement au Viêt-nam*, ed. Patrick Gubry (Paris: Karthala/CÉPED, 2000), 499-500.

29. “By 1932, production began to suffer from the effects of global overproduction (90 million kilos were stockpiled in London in 1935); in France, Indochinese tea was in competition with tea from Ceylan (Sri Lanka) and the Indies.” Pierre Brocheux noted that while, during the 1930s, the area of cultivated land fell from 13,000 hectares in 1935 to 6,100 hectares in 1938, exports increased: the deficit in the balance of annual exports...
Indeed, the growth of plantations benefited from favorable physical and human conditions. The first was the structural underpopulation of hillside villages located in the countryside. For example, the commune of Thái Ninh, where the first colonists began arriving in 1915, contained only ten registered households out of a total area of 7.2 km² in 1908. The same year, in the commune of Ninh Dân, adjacent to Thái Ninh, thirty-one families lived on a total area of 11.8 km². These reports raise questions about the historical continuity and depth of the communes that began to receive an influx of colonist-planters in the 1920s. The seven communes that made up the historical zone where plantations appeared and developed—and where 1,866 illegal settlements were regularized in 1937—already existed between 1810 and 1813. The administrative records at the communal level are fragmentary and incomplete for the period prior to the creation of the Nguyễn dynasty (Gia Long in 1802), making it necessary to examine each of these administrative units separately to learn their individual histories. In the commune of Ninh Dân, for example, even if the period when the commune was founded according to the Ñeåc Phâø (the mythical foundation story) is dubious—since it dates it back to the ancient kingdom of Văn Lang (2879 to 258 BCE), considered to be the first Vietnamese state—, the date when this document was drafted (1572) attests to Ninh Dân’s existence at the end of the sixteenth century. In the property records (diënb aø or dîa aø) of this same commune, established between 1803 and 1805 under the reign of Gia Long as part of an effort to create a general census of the agricultural and inhabited lands of the communes in Bác Thành (Northern Region), thirty-six property owners are officially listed—although the total number of inhabitants is not. This figure is slightly higher than the one for 1908. This stagnation, which could even be qualified as a drop in population, was the result of a period of deep instability in North Vietnam during the second half of the nineteenth century that caused many people to flee, leaving villages partially or

imports as compared to exports from 1924-1930 (2,131/946 metric tons) gradually became a sizeable surplus in 1940 (200/2,556 metric tons). See Brocheux, Une histoire économique du Viet Nam, 86-88.

34. Beginning in 1850, the Taiping Rebellion in China created an influx of thousands of Chinese mercenaries and bandits who penetrated deep into Tonkin territory, as they did in Thái Nguyên province, where they were halted by Emperor Tự Đức’s army in 1851. The pillaging and violence perpetrated by the Black Flags (Cờ đen), the Red Flags (Cờ đỏ), and the Yellow Flags (Cờ vàng), which were grouped together under the generic term “Chinese pirates,” were directly linked to the French wars of colonial conquest. Alliances with these different bands of pirates were periodically declared and then denounced by both the future colonial power and the imperial state, which was
The return of peace at the turn of the century, although only relative and fragile, led to a slow and chaotic “re-colonization” of the deserted and devastated villages. This led to encounters and frequent confrontations between different groups whose places of origins were as varied as their plans for this land: amongst them were residents who had fled and were now returning to reclaim and restore the lands they had abandoned, villagers from neighboring communes on the hilly banks of the Red River who purchased or settled fallow rice paddies, the new local representatives who were clients of the colonial authorities and were granted territorial concessions and privileges, and wood merchants from the plains who came for the lumber. The diversity of these individual and often antagonistic interests makes this first movement seem like a “pioneer front” characterized as it was by conflicts that sometimes turned violent.

The demographic pressure was even weaker because the lower-altitude hillsides suitable for growing tea were the collective property of the villages and remained untouched by agriculture. Up to that point, they had only been used for the extraction of forest products. Thus, there were no direct competitors for the creation of plantations, which did not require any agricultural conversion except for the clearing of the woods. Before that, the Middle Region was seen as an inhospitable and unhealthy area. The Descriptive Geography of the Emperor Đông Khánh, written at the end of nineteenth century (1886-1888), describes the prefecture (phủ) of Lâm Thao and the districts of Thanh Ba and Hả Hòa—two of the four districts that make up the Middle Region (along with Sơn Vi and Càm Khê)—in the following terms: “In the sectors of the phủ where there are a lot of hills and mountains, the cold comes early and violently: the mountain climate is heavy and the cold is fierce. The unhealthy weather is heaviest in the third and ninth [lunar] months: those who go into the mountains (to cut and harvest wood) must choose the days when the weather is good before leaving.”

35. This excerpt from a June 1902 request made by the lỵ tru'o of the commune of Ninh Dân to the tri huyện of Thanh Ba provides a succinct overview of the situation: “Our village is located in the forest zone, which extends over an enormous swath of territory. It was excessively populated in the past. Later, the inhabitants were dispersed by piracy and, as a result, the lands were left fallow.” “Affaires indigènes, village de Ninh Dân,” Fonds de la Résidence de Phú Thọ, NAV, Hanoi. On the same topic, Pierre Gourou wrote: “Very ancient Annamite villages are located on the terraces between the Red River and the Clear River as well as between the terraces on the right bank of the Red River, a little bit upstream of Thanh Ba (Phú Thọ province). These ancient Annamite settlements suffered greatly during the troubles of the nineteenth century when the country was at the mercy of bands of pillagers, the most famous of which were the Black Flags. Many villages have disappeared, and there is a great deal of land for Annamite colonization to recover.” Pierre Gourou, Les paysans du delta tonkinois. Étude de géographie humaine (Paris: Les Éditions d’art et d’histoire, 1936), 201.


reputation: in the late 1930s, Phạm Xuân Đỗ warned potential migrants “against the malaria and stagnant water found in the Thanh Ba district.”

A second factor in the successful development of plantations was the transportation network on which merchandise could be transported in the direction of the plain and Hanoi. The district of Thanh Ba was situated at the center of a triangle bordered by Colonial Route no. 2, the Red River, and the Hải Phòng-Yunnanfou railroad (see map 3). This private railway, built between 1901 and 1911 and connecting Hải Phòng to Lào Cai via Hanoi over a distance of 368 kilometers in Vietnam, traversed the entire province of Phú Thọ. The district of Thanh Ba had no less than four stations: Vũ En, Trí Châu, Hiếu Lê and Thanh Ba. Located only seven kilometers away from the center of the tea-producing zone and serviced by four daily trains, the first two became key points for the tea trade. In this system, Provincial Route no. 99, which was rebaptized the “Tea Road” in 1937, played an essential role in opening up this region by establishing a link between Colonial Route no. 2 and the town of Vũ En—in other words, between the Red River and the railroad.

Finally, there was a third determining factor: the existence of vast available tracts of land in the two forest reserves of Đa Lộc (1,444 ha) and Năng Yên (2,263.30), created in 1914 and 1928 respectively. The reserves were under the domain of the local protectorate and were overseen by the Service forestier de l’Indochine (Indochina Forests Department). It is useful here to specify the actual reality behind this terminology: “The forest reserves of Phú Thọ province are mainly a mix of agriculture and forests and generally include the villages and

References:
39. Henri Bréniér points out that, as of 1914, the transportation of goods provided the railroads in Indochina with their highest gross takings. This was particularly true for the Hải Phòng-Yunnanfou line, even though the price of each metric ton transported was three times higher than on public lines. See Bréniér, Essai d’atlas statistique, 205. It should also be noted that this form of transport was faster and less risky than shipping via the Red River, which was impossible to navigate during the rainy season.
40. Over the course of the first decades of colonization, the disastrous decimation of the forests in Cochinchina was such that two decrees, the first in 1891 and the second in 1894, sought to create a system regulating all the forests in Indochina. The creation of forest reserves was at the center of this project. But even if free use of these reserves was forbidden, “this law, which was very hard on the ‘natives,’ should not be seen as the result of a growing desire for conservation. It was nothing more than a means to regenerate forests that had been depleted by twenty years of colonial use in order to avert the total depletion of these forests.” Frédéric Thomas, Histoire du régime et des services forestiers français en Indochine de 1862 à 1945 (Hanoi: nxb Thế Giới, 1999), 25.
41. Arrêté du gouverneur général de l’Indochine, 31 juillet 1914. Journal officiel de l’Indochine française, 1327-28; arrêté du gouverneur général de l’Indochine, 9 novembre 1928, Journal officiel de l’Indochine française, 3351-52. These two reserves were among the nineteen reserves established between 1908 and 1931 in Phú Thọ province. Their total surface area was 38,386 hectares, over 10% of the total surface area of the province (approximately 3,740 km²).
hamlets that they encompass.” This was the brief definition given by the head of the Service forestier de Tonkin (Tonkin Forests Department) in a letter to the Résident Supérieur dated June 24, 1916, and it reveals a feature of these forests that seemingly contradicts the dual objectives of forest conservation and restoration: human presence and agricultural activities on the reserves. As a result, each decree that designated land as forestland granted restricted rights of use to the inhabitants of the villages included in or adjoining the reserve, particularly the right to cut only the amount of wood needed for local use, which was subject to the prior permission of the Service forestier (Forests Department). It perhaps goes without saying that these types of arrangements, which placed a quota on access to natural resources that had previously been exploited along the lines of customary usage (and which did so for ideological reasons that were quite foreign to local ways of thinking), were artificial and confiscatory.

This conjunction of favorable factors underlines just how incompetent the authorities of the protectorate were in promoting the large projects of industrial production prophesied by enthusiastic agronomists. The authors attenuated this total failure by downplaying the value of the boom in tea cultivation through a denunciation of “native” agricultural practices and modes of curing tea, while simultaneously attributing the indisputable development of these “native plantations” solely to the farsighted research policy popularized by colonial technical agencies. This rhetorical strategy is particularly paradoxical and unconvincing in that it once denigrates indigenous practices and ascribes the responsibility for the successful spread of tea cultivation to the agricultural agencies. Yves Henri bluntly declared: “The planting is often done carelessly, the plants are maintained only a little or not at all and are subjected to brutal treatment, which consists of

43. This situation is confirmed by a location report from the head of the Division forestière de Phú Đaon Forest Department. Dated October 3, 1927, it specifies the composition of the future reserve of Năng Yến. The proposed forest classification project concerned 2,263.30 hectares spread over the territories of nine communes belonging to two districts: 753.82 hectares of “medium-density forest,” 1,145.86 hectares of “forest clearings,” and 138.14 hectares “in recovery.” See decree dated 9 November 1928, “Réserve forestière” sub-file, ref. no. 490 Năng Yến, “Forêts – Réserves dans la province de Phú Thọ,” N 92, no. 75 747, 1908-1939, Fonds RST, NAV, Hanoi.
44. A comparison of the nineteen classification decrees highlights variations in the way they were formulated, and the contents of the regulatory measures are similar. For example, “the inhabitants of the villages bordering the Năng Yến reserves are recognized as having the following rights of usage: 1. Free logging of wood and bamboo as needed for their personal use in the construction and maintenance of their huts and pagodas as well as heating, subject to the presentation of a request before the Service forestier and obedience to the Service’s instructions; 2. Free harvest of Cà-nứa, edible, medicinal, or chewable roots; 3. Free harvest of the leaves of palm trees already existing in the forest, without in any way encouraging the spread of this species; 4. The authorization to freely harvest the sap of the Trâm tràng (canarium copaliferum).” Arrêté du gouverneur général de l’Indochine, 9 November 1928.
simply picking all the adult leaves of the tree two or three times a year, generally
in the fourth and sixth Annamite months.” Goubeaux contrasted the methods
of picking and trimming tea trees employed by the “natives” of Cát Trù, about
which he laconically concluded that “we can see just how barbaric this method is”
compared to the “much more sophisticated” methods of the planters in Thái Ninh:
“Here there is an understanding of trimming: the operation is poorly executed,
but the principle is nonetheless accepted.” He continued: “The planters of Thái
Ninh are far more advanced than those of Cát Trù. We can see here the influence
of the colonial state. In Cát Trù, the Đê Kiêu family, which has maintained the
ancient feudal mindset, is only concerned with squeezing as much money out of the
farmers as they can. While the Thái Ninh landowners, who are very independent-
minded, are open to any and all progress. Thái Ninh sends observers to the Experimental Station in Phú Hô, while in Cát Trù they remain completely unaware of
its very existence.” In other words, beyond the skills and knowledge that the
colony passed on to the local populations, France’s civilizing mission and the social
progress that this engendered was ultimately responsible for open-mindedness and
successful results. The purely mercantile ambitions of the late nineteenth century
were replaced by a positivist discourse, the legitimacy and relevance of which were
guaranteed by the enlightened rationalism of those who had formulated it. Du
Pasquier’s arguments had barely evolved fifteen years later: “It is finally time to
declare the accomplishments of the propaganda program in Phú Thọ province.
The tours throughout the villages, the trials run on individual plantations, and the
demonstrations given at the factory of Phú Hô Station have all inculcated in small
planters the elementary principles of cultivation and preparation. The considerable
development of tea cultivation in this region is largely due to this program.”
This was a nice way of attributing to the actions of the technical agencies—and therefore
the protectorate—the origins and dividends of a development that they themselves
had been unable to set in motion and which spread without their knowledge or
consent.

The “Tea Revolution”: Discovery, Reactions, and Retrieval

The author of the report cited at the beginning of this article made the following
observation:

As of 1930, large tracts of domain lands were settled and cleared covertly with the
complicity of the authorities of the communes and the cantons, either by natives from
the province or immigrants from the delta. The Service provincial du cadastre (Provincial
Land Registry Department) was responsible for discovering, in a forest reserve and hidden

47. Du Pasquier, La production du thé en Indochine, 26.
behind a screen of trees several hundred meters deep, large areas where the devastated forest had been replaced with tea plantations, unknown to the technical agency concerned.  

The question that immediately springs to mind about this version of the story is whether it was really a “discovery,” given the improbability of dissimulation on such a grand scale. Two sources confirm this doubt. The first is a series of letters between the Service forestier, the Résident Supérieur of Tonkin, and the Résident de France in Phú Thọ, which concerned the process of reclassifying all or part of the inhabited forest reserves. Tempers flared between the Résident de France and the head of the Service forestier, as seen in the following letter, which the former sent to the latter on August 3, 1937:

You have asked for my opinion on the reasons in favor of reclassifying the parcels of the Đại Lộc Reserves, currently inhabited by natives from the Tonkin delta. These reasons stem from the situation your service found on the ground when the province’s land registry service was called on-site to examine a request for a land settlement located inside the reserves mentioned earlier and realized extent of the damage done over the last several years. You have no choice but to acknowledge this situation.

Delivered in thinly veiled words, the message was clear: since the Service forestier had failed in its management role, the Service provincial du cadastre deserved the credit for having uncovered the massive violations. The response from the head of the Service forestier, dated ten days later, is particularly informative.

On the numerous occasions when agents of the Service forestier found rays [swidden fields] or encroachment during their tours of the forests, they issued a warrant. My agency has been aware of this situation for quite some time, and through constant repressive action we have fought to put an end to it, using the limited means at our disposal. ... In the three-year period that has just come to a close, the current head of the region, Mr. Dumaison, issued twenty-seven warrants for rays and unauthorized clearings in reserve no. 292.

By his own admission, rather than a “discovery,” this was at most the recognition of a state of affairs his service had been aware of “for quite some time.” An intense correspondence ensued over the question of the status and future of the two forest

reserves that had been implicated.\textsuperscript{51} To briefly summarize, the Résident de France in Phú Thọ wanted to quickly resolve the dual problem of reclassification and illegal settlements without waiting for a land registry map to be drafted, as the head of the Service forestier demanded. Above all, he wanted to reclassify the entirety of the two reserves, while the head of the Service forestier was only in favor of partial action. Contrary to appearances, the central issue of this fierce debate was not so much the preservation of the forest as it was the degree of responsibility held by the different services of the protectorate. Faced with the patent negligence revealed by this “discovery,” each searched for a way to emerge from the crisis honorably. Thus, the head of the Service forestier justified encroachment on the reserves by the complexity and variety of the tasks assigned to his agency, because “most of the time judgments are not enforced.” Of the twenty-seven warrants issued over the previous three years, only one of them led to prosecution. He also attributed part of the responsibility to the laxity of the provincial authorities and agencies. Continuing in this vein and in an attempt to absolve himself, he adopted a position that was, to say the least, unexpected by championing the cause of the Chambre d’agriculture (Chamber of Agriculture) and the Chambre du service agricole du Tonkin (Tonkin Agriculture Department), who argued in favor of the quick and complete reclassification of both forest reserves. To justify this sudden reversal, he claimed that the lands concerned “are suited to agriculture and especially the cultivation of tea,”\textsuperscript{52} even though his predecessor had declared the exact opposite two years earlier: “The areas designated as reserves are composed of steep-sloped hillocks that are not well-suited to permanent cultivation.”\textsuperscript{53} One must therefore be prudent when examining these sources, as their objectivity varies based on the degree of corporatist interest and who was involved.

Nonetheless, out of all of these self-serving arguments, there is one that unquestionably contributed to the speed and breadth of the development of illegal colonization: the lack of human and financial resources that the head of the Service forestier had at his disposal. The following figures make it possible to observe the extent to which this was the case. In 1914, Phú Thọ province (150,000 inhabitants and 479 communes over an area of approximately 3,740 km\(^2\)) was administered by twenty-five French civil servants who headed the different civilian and military agencies, three of whom were forest rangers charged with overseeing the three provincial divisions forestières (forest departments).\textsuperscript{54} In 1929, while the population had nearly doubled (290,000 “natives”), the administrative staff was comprised of

\textsuperscript{51} Nine letters were exchanged between September 14 and December 20, 1937, although some items are missing from the files.

\textsuperscript{52} Letter dated 13 August 1937.


only twenty-nine French officials. The number of forest rangers (three) remained
unchanged, appearing hopelessly small in comparison to the increase in the number
of forest reserves: eleven reserves totaling 5,309 hectares in 1913, sixteen reserves
with a cumulative size of 13,093 hectares in 1928, and nineteen reserves and 38,386
hectares three years later. Far from the idealized image of a protectorate with a
solid presence throughout the whole territory of Tonkin, colonial control rapidly
waned outside of Hanoi, the capital of Indochina. In the provinces surrounding the
Red River Delta, only a handful of representatives from the central administration
directed the provincial agencies located in the district capital. In practice, the
territorial duties of management and regulation of the infra-provincial administra-
tive units were delegated to Mandarin (in the prefectures and districts) and local
(canton and commune) authorities.

In this context, it is easy to see how the native representatives of the adminis-
tration found themselves in a delicate position, torn between their place in local
society and their role in the machinery of coercion and domination imposed by a
foreign power, a position that became untenable when the policies of the protector-
ate came into conflict with the practices and aspirations of the population. They were
forced to accommodate the often poverty-stricken lives of the people under their
charge, show indulgence toward lawbreakers, and feign ignorance of their actions,
when they were not actually complicit and profiting themselves. This can be
deduced from the secondhand documentary source of the requests for the right to
clear forests submitted to the authorities of the protectorate between 1925 and
1932, during the period when tea plantations were rapidly expanding.

Formal requests were rare—only seven for the fifty-four communes in the
Thanh Ba district—, which attests to the general practice of bypassing the adminis-
trative authorization required to clear a parcel of forest, a transgression that neces-
sarily implied the collusion of communal and village authorities. Of the seven
requests submitted, four were refused, either because the desired land was located
inside the limits of a forest reserve, which was enough to declare that the applicant
could not claim to be the legitimate proprietor, or because the head of the Divi-
sion forestière de Phú Đôan (Phú Đoan Forest Department) suspected that the
applicant was motivated “solely by profiting from selling forest products, and is
not concerned with the improvement of these lands.” The approval of the three
dossiers led to the issuance of a decree by the Résidence supérieure of Tonkin.
The first article of the 1927 decree specifies the following:

In order to plant tea trees, Phạm Văn Nghiêm, resident of the village of Đào Giả, huyễn
of Thanh Ba, province of Phú Thọ, is authorized to clear a hillock belonging to him
located in the area called “Mang Quoc” and adjoining the territory of the said village.

56. “Demande de défrichement présentée par Chu Văn Cụ du hameau de Đồng Linh,
village de Đào Giả,” no. 42454, 1927, Fonds RST, NAV, Hanoi.
57. “Demande de défrichement présentée par le village de Hượng Xã,” no. 42468,
1926, Fonds RST, NAV, Hanoi.
The location, boundaries, and size of the area for which this clearing is authorized are to be determined according to the instructions provided on the sketch attached to the present decree.\textsuperscript{58}

The applicant did not hide his intention to plant tea trees, which the Service forestier and the Service provincial du cadastre must, in principle, have known since the legal procedure required that each authorization request for land clearing be submitted to them for examination. According to the rules, each dossier had to include a reasoned request, a letter of recommendation from the tri huyện of Thanh Ba, the dissenting opinion of the head of the Division forestière de Phú Đoan, and the decision of the head of the Service forestier of Tonkin.\textsuperscript{59} It is therefore unlikely that agents of the Division forestière de Phú Đoan actually ventured out to inspect the land in order to verify the applicants’ declarations. Had they done so, they could not have missed the spread of clandestine settlements and land clearing. Above all, there were two garderies forestières (forest stations) in Thái Ninh and Đại Lộc, located directly in the center of the historical zone of plantations: the native rangers must therefore have witnessed the progressive settlement of the forest reserves occurring right before their eyes.

Similar doubts can be raised about the Service provincial du cadastre. While the Résident de France in Phú Thọ proudly announced that this agency was behind the famous “discovery,” he conspicuously failed to mention that it took ten years to realize this. And yet the profound transformations of the landscape were visible from Provincial Route no. 99: “On either side of the road, the hillsides are either covered with lush vegetation or cleared in order to plant tea. Furthermore, there are a number of newly created villages, whose roofs can be seen poking out from the canopy as far as the eye can see: it is truly a beautiful landscape to behold.”\textsuperscript{60}

In practice, the local populace thus had free reign: the authorities of the commune and canton were involved in the illegal colonization along with the personnel of the two garderies forestières and the representatives of both the administration and the Mandarin component at the district level. As for the French agents of the provincial government, their ignorance is slightly more puzzling: either they never ventured out into the field and therefore had no idea that the situation had radically evolved, or their silence was the result of a constrained or deliberate desire not to inform their superiors. In either case, once they were humiliated by the “natives” and could no longer deny the evidence, the protectorate authorities had no choice but to react.

\textsuperscript{58} “Demande de défrichement présentée par Phảm Vǎn Nghiêm du village de Đào Giá,” no. 42460, 1927, Fonds RST, NAV, Hanoi.
\textsuperscript{59} The difficulty and complexity of such a procedure, for which the nature of the property, its surface area, the boundaries of the terrain, and the good faith of the applicant all had to be demonstrated, was enough to discourage even the most “legalistic” members of the administered population.
\textsuperscript{60} Phảm Xuân Đỗ, Phú Thọ tỉnh địa chí, 79-80.
Beginning in December 1937, the colonial administration sought to regain control by officially sanctioning the movement of spontaneous colonization and initiating a new stage in the process of the development of the domain lands in order to welcome new migrants from the Tonkin delta. In fact, the demographic imbalance in Indochina, especially the thorny problem of “overpopulation” in the Tonkin delta, had formed the subject of numerous studies conducted since the turn of the century. All, or nearly all, of them argued that the only livable and sustainable solution was the massive displacement of part of the delta population toward the vast underpopulated areas of the Middle Region and the “High [or Upland] Region” of Laos, Cambodia, and especially Cochinchina, where they estimated that 400,000 hectares suitable for rice farming were available. But the results of the different projects that had been attempted over the three decades prior to this were disappointing, to say the least, and never came close to meeting the ambitious goal of controlling demographic growth. At the beginning of the 1940s, excess growth was estimated at 100,000 to 120,000 per year in the Tonkin delta alone, while the two principle emigration efforts set up by the Office de la colonisation (Colonization Office), the Commissions permanentes de colonisation (Permanent Standing Committees on Colonization), the Office de colonisation rurale de la Cochinchine (Office of Rural Colonization in Cochinchina), and the Conseil supérieur de la colonisation (Superior Council of Colonization) only accounted for eight thousand annual departures toward the large farms and plantations of Cochinchina (101,000 over thirteen years) and 1,100 expatriations toward French holdings in the Pacific (13,600 over twelve years). Furthermore, “2/3 of these migrants later returned to their home villages.”

61. The agronomist René Dumont and the geographer Pierre Gourou both advocated this Malthusian perspective. Dumont wrote that “no real progress can be made as long as the delta continues to have an excessive population, which, given the current economic realities, it can neither sufficiently feed nor house normally.” René Dumont, La culture du riz dans le delta du Tonkin. Étude et propositions d’amélioration des techniques traditionnelles de riziculture tropicale (Patanài: Prince of Songkia University, 1935; repr. 1995), 63. According to Gourou, “the excessive density of the population is a problem with no solution. ... These peasants are already using their soil at almost maximum capacity; neither hydraulic projects nor technical advances could increase production to the point of changing the material conditions of their lives [chronic poverty].” Gourou, Les paysans du delta tonkinois, 577. According to the unanimously agreed-upon number, in the 1930s, the Tonkin delta contained a demographic excess of 1.5 to 2 million people, out of a total population of 7-8 million. See Grégoire Kherian, “Esquisse d’une politique démographique en Indochine,” Recueil indochinois juridique et économique I (1937): 41.


63. A first attempt at official colonization in 1907 resulted in the resettlement of eighty-four families (328 people) from the Thái Bình province to the Cạn Thơ province. Most of them were eventually repatriated in the years that followed. See Raymond Grivaz, Aspects sociaux et économiques du sentiment religieux en pays annamite (Paris: Éd. Montchrétien, 1942).

In this context, it is possible to understand why the dynamic of spontaneous
colonization that developed in the Thanh Ba district caught the attention of colo-
nial authorities and why they labored to harness its potential financial and political
dividends. The cornerstone of these measures was the creation of the “Programme
de Petite Colonization Indigène de la province de Phú Thọ” (Program for Small-
Scale Indigenous Colonization in Phú Thọ Province). Properly speaking, this was
not really an innovation. Rather, it simply recycled and implemented the general
rules put forward in the decree of November 13, 1925 by the Résident Supérieur
of Tonkin, which, twelve years before, had defined a legal standard for the grant-
ing of small concessions to the indigenous populations for free (with a maximum
size of 15 mâu, or 5.5 hectares). Prior to this, such a framework had been an empty
shell: “An examination of the authorizations records finds that only five provisional
concessions had been granted as of December 31, 1935.”65 The same failure was
true for the whole of Tonkin: “The general opinion is that the system established
by the decree of November 13 is far from a success. ... In ten years, fewer than
1,400 concessions were granted, meaning an average of 140 per year!” The author
concludes: “The entrepreneurial and courageous cultivators who risked departing
from the Delta unfortunately represent only an infinitesimal minority. Given this,
if we really wish to break up the agglomerations in the delta, we must quickly
adopt a firm policy of directed collective colonization, the only way to accomplish
large-scale population displacements.”66 He could not imagine that individual initi-
atives outside of the colonial model would ever be feasible.

Equipped with this tool, which was particularly well-suited to the situation, the
Résident Supérieur of Tonkin outlined the approach that he planned to undertake
in the region in a letter of December 20, 1937 to the Résident de France in Phú Thọ.

It is not my intention to reclassify the entirety of forest reserves nos. 292 and 490. It is
appropriate to reclassify the reserves that have the following characteristics: 1. that contain
tracts irregularly occupied by natives who cultivate tea, in order to regularize an already
established situation; 2. that contain wooded enclaves that are either suited for use in the
cultivation of tea or suited to remain wooded for use as firewood in the preparation of tea.67

Using this as a base, the planned colonization of the province took a four-pronged
approach.68 First, 1,866 clandestine settlements were regularized, and 991 additional

65. “Programme de colonisation dans la province de Phú Thọ,” Fonds RST, NAV, 
Hanoi.
66. Discours de M. Tholanche à la Chambre des représentants du peuple du Tonkin,
20 octobre 1936, in Grégoire Kherian, “Esquisse d’une politique démographique en
Đại Lục et Năng Yến,” sub-file, ref. nos. 292 and 490, decree no. 96, 8 June 1938,
“Forêts – Réserves dans la province de Phú Thọ,” N 92, no. 75 747, 1908-1939, Fonds
RST, NAV, Hanoi.
68. Synthesis of two documents from the Fonds RST, NAV, Hanoi: “Carte du pro-
gramme de colonisation dans la province de Phú Thọ,” no. 67053, 1938-1939 ; “Pro-
gramme de colonisation dans la province de Phú Thọ.”
lots were granted in the form of small concessions (15 mâu), for a total of 19,500 mâu (7,000 hectares) concentrated in a unified pocket centered around the historical zone of plantation development: the seven communes of Thái Ninh, Đào Già, Ninh Dân, Đại Lục, Đại Đông, Hanh Cù, and Thanh Cù. Then, taking what the “natives” had accomplished and what the authorities themselves had been unable to do as a model, they delimited two new sectors on both sides of this pocket designated for “small-scale indigenous colonization,” which encompassed a total of 25,000 mậu (9,000 hectares) of forest reserves. After that, in the northern section of the Hà Hòa district, 1,500 mậu (around 550 hectares) were to set aside for European “large-scale colonization.” Finally, on the right bank of the Red River, two projects were undertaken: a housing development of around 15,000 mậu (5,400 hectares) to be distributed in the form of “small concessions under administrative control” destined exclusively for immigrants from the Red River delta. In 1939, 120 colonist families from Nam Định province were displaced in this manner, and 2,000 mậu (720 hectares) were dedicated to the creation of population concessions in an area bordered by three newly created forest reserves.

In less than two years, 63,000 mậu (23,000 hectares) were administratively designated for agricultural colonization and the development of tea cultivation. This opportunistic and ambitious plan would never be fully realized: only a third of the land had been granted by 1939, when the Japanese occupation and the first Indochina War brought the French projects in the region to an end.

At first glance, the protectorate’s prioritization of “small-scale indigenous colonization,” to the detriment of large-scale European colonization, seems rather surprising. It can be explained by the conjunction of two factors. The first was that, by the late 1930s, large-scale European colonization of the Middle Region had not produced promising results nor grown as anticipated, far from it. The second was that the displacement of part of the Red River Delta population was considered to be the sole realistic and sustainable solution to the otherwise intractable problem of structural overpopulation in the delta and the pauperization of a growing segment of the peasantry. Therefore, those planning the colonization of Phú Thọ province did not think of it as a balancing act between the interests of the French colonists and the natives but rather as a tool that could be used to redistribute the population on the scale of Indochina as a whole. In fact, criticism of this policy,

69. Created on March 20, 1936, by a decree from the Résident Supérieur of Tonkin, the policy of “population concessions,” founded by and around a “benefactor” who was responsible for the recruitment of colonists and their moral and material management, represents the archetype of the evolutionist and paternalist colonial vision. “Most of the success stories of Annamite colonization had as a central figure a person of this sort, sometimes a philanthropic high-ranking Mandarin, sometimes a French or Annamite missionary, sometimes even French colonists or mining companies.” Kherian, “Esquisse d’une politique démographique en Indochine,” 42.

70. “Minutes des fiches de concessions à Phú Thọ,” no. 166, 1936, Fonds RST, NAV, Hanoi. At this date, the districts of Thanh Ba and Hà Hòa did not contain a single European concession. It was not until 1941 that two concessions of this type were granted in Thanh Ba.
which gave priority to emigrants from the delta, primarily came from local planters, some of whose ambitions extended far beyond modest concessions of 15 mâu.

The case of Trần Văn Hởi, who identified himself as a “planter and producer of Indochinese tea, living in the village of Thái Ninh,” is representative of this desire to increase the scale of production. Between 1938 and 1940, he sent five requests, first to the Résident de France in Phú Thọ, then to the Résident Supérieur of Tonkin and, finally, to the Gouverneur Général of Indochina, all with the same purpose: obtaining a concession ranging from 164 to 482 hectares, depending on who received his petitions, in order to create a “modern tea plantation.” To support his requests, he did not hesitate to question whether the policy of “small-scale native colonization” was suited to the socio-economic situation that he claimed to have observed on the ground.

The small-scale colonists settled on 5-hectare concessions find themselves reduced to experimenting with all kinds of crops (rice, corn, potatoes) in order to feed themselves and neglect their principle task: tea cultivation. ... This is why I think that in places where individual families do not have rice paddies to cultivate rice, they cannot undertake other types of agriculture. In order to succeed, it would therefore be useful to grant these concessions to people who have access to sufficient resources and tested methods. ... I would be very grateful if you responded favorably to this [request for a concession]. I can assure you in advance that I will do everything in my power to reach my goals, which are: first, to give a boost to the future of Indochinese tea; second, to develop uncultivated areas; and, third, to create more jobs for the families living in poverty in the overpopulated delta.71

The final request, addressed to the Gouverneur Général of Indochina, implicitly reveals the widening gap between the aspirations of these entrepreneurial planters and the policy adopted by the colonial administration.

I've already tried to ‘expand’ in this area, but my requests for a concession have unfortunately gone unanswered. I have consistently come up against the restrictions provided in the decree of November 13, 1925 on small-scale colonization. ... But now that we know the importance of this product, it is regrettable that this decree cannot be modified to allow for the grant of larger concessions to individuals who could develop a great industry.72

Although the Gouverneur Général’s response was intended to be instructive, the applicant’s request was again dismissed.

The lands in question are, in fact, part of the forest reserves, whose reclassification was ordered by my decree of June 8, 1938 exclusively for the purpose of small-scale


Collected Memories

I too regret being unable to fulfill your request to modify certain provisions of the Résident Supérieur of Tonkin’s decree of November 13, 1925 concerning small-scale indigenous colonization. This text was not, in fact, aimed at developing the uncultivated lands in the Middle Region of Tonkin but sought to remedy the overpopulation of the Tonkin Delta. This explains the limit of one concession per applicant.\(^{73}\)

The Gouverneur Général reaffirmed that the Middle Region was to become one of the outlets for emigration from the Red River delta by offering newcomers the possibility of developing a viable economic activity for themselves, not by becoming an area of large-scale agriculture that could employ a considerable number of manual laborers, even if these laborers came from the delta.

Trần Văn Hội’s remarks and recommendations, which were both relevant and drew on a familiarity with the colonial agenda and rhetoric, would not have resonated as much nor provoked the intervention of the highest levels of the colonial hierarchy if he had been the only one adopting this particular approach.\(^{74}\) His requests were part of a stream of requests for grants of large land concessions from local natives, which forced the administration to adopt a coherent and unequivocal position on the subject. This clarification was even more necessary and urgent given that the modifications of the legal framework promulgated ten years earlier theoretically conferred to Annamites the right to obtain large concessions.\(^{75}\)

Therefore, refusals of these requests needed to both justify and constitute a new legal doctrine that could fend off any potential new legal proceedings.\(^{76}\) The Gouvernement Général of Indochina’s growing interest in the prospects offered by the development of tea cultivation shifted the balance of power on the ground.

74. He also haphazardly invoked the necessity of satisfying the North African market: “It was for this reason that an Indochinese agency was created in Algeria to promote agricultural products,” not to mention the “Propaganda Committee that was recently organized in Paris and headed by Mr. De Fol, which fully justifies the Metropole’s interest in the important question of Indochinese tea.” Letter to the Résident Supérieur of Tonkin, 12 October 1938, “Demande de concession de 200 ha à Thái Ninh formulée par Trần Văn Hội,” N 67 047, 1938-1940, Fonds RST, NAV, Hanoi.
75. The decree of March 28, 1929 made free land grants of a maximum of 300 hectares officially available to Annamites. This policy was accompanied by the decree of March 20, 1936, which laid out the policy of “population concessions” and established the policy of group-based colonization.
76. In a 1939 report, the Administrateur Résident de France in Phú Thọ justified the rejection of five requests for “population concessions”: “Large-scale colonization and population colonization should be limited to regions that are isolated, unhealthy, or unsafe, where, for whatever reason, spontaneous immigration is not an option. These conditions are only very rarely found in Phú Thọ province .... To summarize, the policy of small-scale colonization (granting of concessions of less than 15 mûn, as per the decree of November 13, 1925) appears to me to be in every way the only acceptable and desirable policy, from both a social and financial point of view.” “Programme de colonisation dans la province de Phú Thọ,” Fonds RST, NAV, Hanoi.
Having been forced to live under a semblance of clandestinity for two decades, the planters turned the recent official recognition of their status and land ownership to their advantage by adopting a new form of collective representation. They united to form an organization named the “Corporation de planteurs indigènes” (Corporation of Native Planters), whose existence was revealed in a petition to the Résident Supérieur submitted on November 5, 1937, while he was visiting the plantations of Thanh Ba district. The statement begins as follows: “Ever confident in your benevolence and your dedication to our well-being, we humbly request that you, Monsieur the Résident Supérieur, please examine the enclosed petition, which represents the wishes of the majority of the inhabitants of Đạo Giã and Thái Ninh.”

Behind the expressions of allegiance to authority, this petition, strictly speaking, came from an organization that was conscious of its own socio-economic weight and did not hesitate to consider itself a proactive force: the text questions and demands more than it suggests. The seven principal demands can be divided into two distinct groups. The first group includes requests for the improved conditions of tea production and sale: “You will aid our corporations by protecting us against the abuse of tea purchasers who seek every occasion to do us harm,” and “you will designate and recommend a sales outlet to which we can sell our tea.” The petitioners explicitly asked the protectorate to organize, supervise, and regulate the channels of sale for their products in order to guarantee satisfactory prices and outcomes. The second group consists of requests for the creation and improvement of infrastructure: the construction of a school and a hospital in addition to the repair of the road network, particularly Provincial Route no. 99.

Monsieur the Résident Supérieur, here again is a wish that we ardently hope to see fulfilled: route no. 99 ... which is the sole road used for the transport of our teas, includes nine wooden bridges and several low-lying stretches that harm our business every year during the rainy season. ... You will have route no. 99 repaired, reduce the number of bridges, and replace them over time with stonework bridges.

77. Corporations (phu'o`'ng) were a widespread form of professional organization in pre-colonial Vietnam. In popular culture, corporations were identified by their trades, from which the generic expression “association of 100 trades” is derived. Their activities varied, from the creation of tontines to the collection of funds for marriages or deaths, since the association “traditionally sent offerings, gifts, or money to members.” See Phan Kế Bính, Việt Nam Phong Túc [Morals and Customs of Viêt-Nam] (Paris: EFE0, 1975), 209. Beyond these material exchanges, the goal of these corporations was to “create a necessary communion between people in the same social condition” and to increase their prestige by offering religious objects to the communal house (dinh) that belonged exclusively to them and bore their name. See Nguyễn Tự Chi, “Le lăng traditionnel au Bắc Bồ, sa structure organisationnelle, ses problèmes,” Le village traditionnel (Hanoi: xbx Thê Giriş, 1993), 94. The originality of this “Corporation of Native Planters” lay in its desire and ability to advance grievances.

79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.
In the end, how many of these demands were met? It is difficult to know, since the archives end at the beginning of World War II. The only exception is Route no. 99, which was repaired almost immediately. On November 10, 1937, only five days after this petition was submitted to the Résident Supérieur of Tonkin, the Administrateur Résident in Phú Thọ wrote to him.

*In order to allow me to organize the detachment of prisoners who must very soon be sent to repair Provincial Route no. 99, called ‘the tea road,’ and pave the roadway during the ongoing dry season, I have the honor of requesting that you place at my immediate disposal 50 physically-fit prisoners.*

The promptness of the authorities’ response reveals the important role tea played in the provincial economy, both financially and socially. It probably stemmed from promises the Résident Supérieur pronounced during his travels around the Thanh Ba district. Beyond its concrete effects, this response formally recognized this organization of producers by treating it as a legitimate interlocutor representing a unique collective identity. The final demand submitted by the planters should be examined within the context of the evolution of the relationship between those involved.

*In order to better attract new immigrants, in order to encourage them by giving them work, we solicit the Résident Supérieur’s great benevolence to do away with the remaining forest reserves, which serve as facades masking the agriculture that takes place behind them from the Service forestier’s vigilance, in order to grant these lands to those who wish to cultivate tea. This would center the cultivation of this very promising crop in Đào Già, Thái Ninh, Ninh Đàn, and the surrounding region.*

This was indeed a real moment of emancipation because the colonized enjoined the representatives of colonial power to act reasonably and lucidly by taking down the facade that the authorities had arrogantly put in place and by which they were themselves ultimately deceived. While no document states this explicitly, the acknowledged disappearance of the last bits of the forest reserves of Đài Lục and Năng Yên at the end of the 1930s indicates that the colonial administration heeded this request by consciously allowing colonization to continue, since it was considered both inevitable and beneficial to the two parties involved during a period when the metropole was accelerating its financial disengagement from the usual areas of colonial intervention. It is likely that the colonial authorities,

---

83. The forecasts made in 1937 by Paul Bernard, graduate of the École polytechnique and president of the Société française financière et coloniale (SFFC), are even more pessimistic. He estimated that, by 1948, the Tonkin Delta would contain an excess of 2.4 million peasants, while the transmigration envisaged by the Gouverneur Général would only be able to transplant a maximum of 40,000 individuals, due to the amount of money involved: 10,000 francs per family before the first harvest. For him, as well as for a certain number of high-ranking bureaucrats posted to Indochina when the
however much they might have wanted, chose not to take the risk of further opposing a practice whose very existence and scope over the preceding two decades served as an admission of the administration’s inability to control local society.

The Outcome: Profound Upheaval (1920-1945)

In the space of two decades, the “tea revolution” provoked profound upheaval in the region by irreversibly transforming both the physical landscape and the socio-economic characteristics of several districts in Phú Thọ province. This led to a new form of economic activity in the area, whereby a process of individual appropriation focused on rapidly converting vast tracts of inhospitable hillsides—the collective property of villages—to intensive monoculture. This conquest further damaged the forests that had already suffered from the absence of any real regulation. Two factors, both consequences of the rapid increase in planted areas, accentuated the forest’s retreat: on the one hand, the rise in domestic demand for wood products (building materials, firewood) was accompanied by a proportional growth in population; on the other hand, the on-site processing of fresh tea leaves, and especially their drying, required a large amount of fuel. As both indicator and symbol of the area’s transformation, the forest reserves are the only areas for which the substitution of tea for forest is quantifiable, and they quite literally disappeared over the course of a decade.

The ensuing population explosion was fueled by a dual flow of migration. The 2,857 colonist-planter settlements (1,866 regularized settlements and 991 new grants) that were officially recorded in 1939 in the seven communes of the Thanh Ba district contained, on average, 410 named plantations per commune. In comparison to the individual tax rate for 1926, which counted men over the age of eighteen who lived in the province and paid the individual tax, the number of family farms in these same communes had increased sevenfold in fifteen years. If anything, this estimate is low, since the 1939 numbers only counted illicit plantations located on the forest reserve land, therefore excluding all of the plantations on private lands. The exponential growth in cultivated land, which began in the mid-1920s, caused the second migratory stream by creating demand for manual labor, which grew along with the spread of plantations. Over the course of the entire year, 6,000-6,500 agricultural wage laborers—men and women from the most densely

Popular Front was in power, the crisis that continued to afflict the Western world, particularly France, required a transformation in the method of profiting from the colonies. This entailed replacing the export of capital to the colony with the export of French goods, widening the internal market, and fighting against the increasing pauperization of the peasantry through massive and rapid industrialization of the colony accompanied by gradual political reforms. See Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hemery, *Indochine. La colonisation ambiguë, 1858-1954* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), 311-12.

84. "Rôle des impôts personnels des différents phu, huê, châu et centres urbains de la province de Phú Thọ,” 14, 1297, 1926-1927, Fonds de la province de Phú Thọ, NAV, Hanoi.
populated provinces of the Red River Delta (Thái Bình, Nam Hà, and Nam Định)—were needed to work the 19,500 mầu of tea fields located on the local domain lands alone. During the harvest (May to October) the number rose to 10,000 seasonal workers. As a result, the gradient of population density, which had been inversely proportional to altitude, faded by the end of the 1930s: population was no longer concentrated solely on the hilly banks of the Red River, having spread steadily into the interior.

This general social and economic transformation had two different features: the development of capitalist modes of production and the evolution of a domestic economic model founded on the cultivation of rice for local use into a plantation economy oriented toward the production and commercial sale of a cash crop. These transformations were such that they led to the reorganization of intermediate-level political and administrative units. The district (huyện) of Thanh Ba in 1939, followed by the districts of Hà Hòa and Cẩm Khê in 1943, were upgraded to the rank of prefecture (phủ). The Résident de France’s request to “upgrade the huyện of Thanh Ba to phủ,” which he sent to the Résident Supérieur of Tonkin provides a glimpse of the motivation behind this change.

The agricultural potential of the soil in addition to the numerous routes of communication, the railroad, the Red River, and Colonial Route no. 2 that reach it place this huyện among the richest in the region. The intensive development of tea cultivation over the course of these past few years has even more dramatically increased its economic importance. In 1937, tea exports from this region alone reached over 1,000 metric tons, representing a market value of more than 600,000 $ [piasters]. Moreover, and as I had the honor of bringing to your attention in my transmission mentioned earlier, the recent grant of more than 900 concessions in the region served by Provincial Route no. 99, called the ‘Tea Road,’ will stimulate a flow of immigration sizeable enough for me to deem it desirable to appoint a well-experienced Mandarin with a fairly long track record of administrative service to the head of this district. It is worth taking into consideration that immigrant manual laborers may come into conflict, at least right after their arrival, with the demands of the notables and the local population and that the provincial administration could be called upon to mediate the numerous conflicts that will undoubtedly be provoked by the influx of outside manual labor.85

Beyond the central role of tea in the Administrateur Résident’s argument, the situation he describes has all of the characteristics of a pioneering dynamic, which blended unbridled economic development, the intensification of commercial exchange, and the arrival of a growing number of immigrants. He argues that the district unit (huyện) is no longer sufficient given the level of immigration: “the influx of outside manual labor” in the region, encouraged by the colonial authorities, could create tension among the locals, justifying an upgrade of the political and

administrative structure and its management. Requests to upgrade the districts (huyện) of Hạ Hòa and Cảm Khê to the status of prefecture (phủ) provide a similar picture of conquest and unrestrained development.\footnote{Decree no. 4215, dated September 4, 1943.}

The former [the district of Hạ Hòa], which comprises an area of 50,000 hectares and borders Yên Bái province, contains vast areas of hillocks that are currently being cleared. There are 7 large concessions and 600 small concessions. These lands are particularly well-suited to the cultivation of tea. Thus, the gradual colonization will develop even further once the tea markets return to normal. ... It is not unlikely that this region will surpass the phủ of Thanh Ba, which currently contains 32,141 inhabitants over an area of 17,860 hectares. The size of Hạ Hòa’s population increased from 16,341 in 1938 to 28,179 in 1942, with a corresponding rise in individual taxes, from 23,938 \( $ \) [piasters] to 38,798 \( $ \), and property taxes, from 31,557 \( $ \) to 41,066 \( $ \).\footnote{“Érection en phủ du huyện de Cảm Khê,” no. 68828, 1943, Fonds RST, NAV, Hanoi.}

The numbers listed by the Administrateur Résident show unprecedented growth over the course of four years: the population increased by more than 40\% as did the taxes collected. The outlook for the development of tea cultivation in this district was therefore quite promising and would most likely be realized “once the tea markets return to normal,” a euphemistic reference to the global economic crisis, the war, and the Japanese occupation and its demands on agricultural production,\footnote{The Japanese occupation was harshly felt, even down to the village level: “The impact of the Japanese coup against the Vichy French was felt in the village when orders came to convert rice lands to the production of industrial crops like castor oil seed and jute.” John Kleinen, \textit{Facing the Future, Reviving the Past: A Study of Social Change in a Northern Vietnamese Village} (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), 74.} which eventually provoked the terrible famine of 1945.\footnote{The famine that occurred between the fall of 1944 and the winter of 1945 caused the deaths of 1.5-2 million peasants, principally in the Red River Delta. See Nguyễn Thê Anh, “La famine de 1945 au Nord Viêt-nam,” \textit{Approche Asie} 8 (1985): 103-16.} Furthermore, according to Phạm Xuân Đỗ’s rather cynical analysis, these tragic events actually led to a period of unexpected prosperity: “On the contrary, the tea merchant from Phú Thọ is more prosperous than before, for two reasons: first, Chinese tea could not be transported during wartime; second, there were many opportunities for exporting black tea to France, North Africa (Algeria), and the United States.” The author concludes that “the development of tea made Phú Thọ one of the wealthiest provinces of Tonkin, one that was destined to become the richest province in the North in the subsequent decade.”\footnote{Phạm Xuân Đỗ, \textit{Phú Thọ tỉnh địa chí}, 68-69.} It seemed as if nothing could slow this unstoppable rise.

86. Decree no. 4215, dated September 4, 1943.
88. The Japanese occupation was harshly felt, even down to the village level: “The impact of the Japanese coup against the Vichy French was felt in the village when orders came to convert rice lands to the production of industrial crops like castor oil seed and jute.” John Kleinen, \textit{Facing the Future, Reviving the Past: A Study of Social Change in a Northern Vietnamese Village} (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), 74.
89. The famine that occurred between the fall of 1944 and the winter of 1945 caused the deaths of 1.5-2 million peasants, principally in the Red River Delta. See Nguyễn Thê Anh, “La famine de 1945 au Nord Viêt-nam,” \textit{Approche Asie} 8 (1985): 103-16.
The “(Re)Discovery” or the Necessary Decolonization of Mentalities

While the “tea revolution” was the result of an endogenous dynamic—since the “natives” had been the principle architects of plantation growth—, its origins were essentially colonial. In order to satisfy the demand of the new colonial rulers, tea, which was previously a garden crop produced only for individual consumption, became over the course of a few years a cash crop that supplied the Indochinese, French, and North African markets. This commercial evolution resulted from the establishment of a colonial relationship based on exploitation and founded on the introduction of capitalist modes of production that served a policy of resource extraction (agriculture, logging, mines) and revenue collection (property and individual taxes; monopolies on alcohol, salt, opium, etc). That said, it is undeniable that the colonist-planters deliberately adopted this model of capitalist development by taking advantage of new economic opportunities that arose from French intervention and the flaws in a defective system of domination.

This last point should be evaluated in light of the debate that began in the mid-1970s over the question of the nature of the pre-colonial Vietnamese peasant economy and its evolution during the colonial period. This debate oscillated between the concept of ethical and moral economy as defined by James Scott in 1976 and the concept of rational economy defended by Samuel Popkin in 1979. For the former, the systems of agricultural production were historically constructed by a logic of risk limitation, with peasants attributing absolute priority to self-sufficiency and therefore the security of the domestic group. Out of this developed a cultural reluctance to change, which was exacerbated by the collective control that the village community exercised over all of its members. Cognitively, innovation was synonymous with the transgression of norms and represented a potential threat to the stability of social order and the local hierarchy. Arguing against this culturalist approach, Samuel Popkin’s view freed peasants from dominating socio-cultural constraints without denying their existence. His theory endowed peasants with the ability to develop individual strategies for diversifying their occupations in order to adapt to the evolving environment and enter into networks of commercial exchange. By affirming that the peasants and the local elite were culturally receptive to the principles of profit and the accumulation of wealth, he rejected the second part of James Scott’s analysis, which held that the rebellious movements emerging out of the countryside should be interpreted as defensive and hostile reactions to the violation of traditional structures and institutions provoked by the brutal and peremptory intrusion of the colonial system of capitalism.

In the classic paradigmatic debate of “holism vs. individualism,” the opportunism and capacity for innovation shown by the colonist-planters are two prominent characteristics that unambiguously reflect the concept of the rational economy and the underlying theory of rational choice. One must therefore admit that the integration of native domestic agriculture into the sphere of the capitalist economy was not necessarily imposed and/or constrained and that it did not systematically harm the population’s material livelihood. This group of colonist-planters’ prosperity was nonetheless an exception and occurred despite the spiral of underdevelopment that the countryside of Tonkin experienced during the first half of the twentieth century, as shown in the data examined by Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery in the *Annuaire statistiques de l’Indochine* (1913-1943). It illustrates a steady deterioration of the dietary situation over the course of this period: in 1913, the ratio of grain/population was at three quintals of paddy per inhabitant per year, an amount that was just barely sufficient to sustain an adult; by 1943 it had dropped to 1.9 quintals. Over the course of three decades, Tonkin went from a balanced state of food production—albeit a precarious one, since it could be upset in the event of a bad harvest (adverse weather or flooding)—to a situation of structural food crisis. The pauperization of the population eventually proved a key element in the success of the “tea revolution.” By turning tens of thousands of starving and unemployed villagers, most of them from the region of the Red River Delta, out of their homes, this crisis provided the farmers with a continual and readily available flow of cheap manual labor, which was indispensable to the development of the plantation economy.

While this causal link might seem awful, it serves as a timely reminder that the attitudes and trajectories of the different elements of colonial society cannot be reduced to a Manichean vision placing them in a unilateral and stable relationship of opposition and resistance to the colonial powers. Here, as elsewhere, the vagaries of colonial contact upset the processes of social formation by either exacerbating internal contradictions or erasing them through the creation of a united front against coercive rule, which led to novel corporatist interests and pragmatic alliances that refashioned colonized society without simplifying it. The official recognition by the protectorate’s authorities of the intrinsic complexity of rural society constitutes the true “discovery” mentioned at the beginning of this article. In fact, beyond factual explanations (the protectorate’s reach was not consistently exercised over the entire territory; its power declined and became uncertain as the distance from the capital increased), there was a growing awareness of the actual

92. By bringing Indochina into the demographic transition (lowering the mortality rate) without mobilizing the human and financial means necessary to create a corresponding rise in agricultural production commensurate with the exponential increase in the population, the colonial powers contributed to the chronic food shortage in Tonkin. The international crisis of 1929 accelerated and amplified this process and ultimately led to famine and revolt.
93. It is generally held that the sufficient amount of rice to feed an adult is an annual ration of 300-350 kilos of paddy, or 210-250 kilos of rice per person per year.
situation, which, by the end of the 1930s, could no longer be overlooked or avoided. Not only were the peasants no longer permanently tied to their villages, since they voluntarily left them to colonize new areas and take advantage of economic opportunities while maintaining solid links with their native villages, but they existed as individuals in their own right as opposed to the simple aggregate of an undifferentiated mass of humanity. The colonization movement was thus the result of a collection of individual choices made at the level of the domestic group and not a forced collective undertaking.

It must be said that this dual reality diverges fundamentally from the theory subscribed to by all of the authors of the time, who considered the “traditional village” an organic superstructure that dominated every aspect of the social, economic, and spiritual lives of its inhabitants, burdening them with its own particular moral character, which replaced that of the inhabitants. This intellectual position enjoyed unanimous support, was propagated by both the press and popular literature, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, heavily influenced the way the colonial administration viewed the peasantry, guiding the actions it took in the Tonkin countryside. The programmatic vision for the glorious future of tea cultivation was no exception. Up until the end of the 1930s, every proposed project relied exclusively on capitalist companies directed by European planters. “Natives” were

95. My fieldwork set out to develop a quantitative evaluation of the migratory flow within three established lineages in the commune of Mạn Lạn, which was the departure point for many colonist-planters during the first half of the twentieth century. I found that 57-80% of adult men in each of these lineages left their village to settle in the historical zone of plantation development. A movement of this size, distributed relatively evenly over the area of departure, contradicts the image of migration as the final stage in the pauperization of the marginal group of peasant society for whom departure was the only means of survival. On the contrary, this study conveys an image of economic development, dynamism, and the characteristics of a pioneer movement, which is incongruous with this period of crisis. For individuals considering migration, the fact that some migrants returned to the commune of Mạn Lạn demonstrated that departure was not a one-way street in that it was not necessarily definitive. The fact that the migratory process was not considered irreversible made departure socially and economically more conceivable and widespread. See Tessier, “Le Pays natal est un carambole sucré.”

96. See the following case in point: “They [the villagers] docilely submit to all of the obligations placed on them by their dual dependence on family and commune. They are so bent by this discipline that they cannot conceive of the spirit of individual liberty that characterizes the European. ... These social and religious ties are so strong that the Annamite rarely leaves his village, and if he does, he always returns.” Émile Delamarre, “La réforme communale au Tonkin,” Revue du Pacifique 1, no. 3 (1924): 211-12. This culturalist approach did not disappear along with colonization: “Since each Vietnamese village is an identity and an entity in itself, distinguished from other villages by its traditions, social practices, moral rules, and tutelary deity who represents its protector and embodies its soul, the cult dedicated to this deity becomes the business of the community as a whole.” Nguyễn Văn Kỳ, La société vietnamienne face à la modernité. Le Tonkin de la fin du XIXe siècle à la Seconde Guerre mondiale (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995), 28-29. For a more complete examination of this question, see Philippe Papin and Olivier Tessier, eds., Le village en questions [Làng ở vùng châu thổ sông Hồng: vẫn dè còn bó ngô] (Hanoi: Publications du centre de l’EFEO, 2002).
only involved as coolies, the “hard-working” and “docile” manual laborers who were given the most exhausting tasks and whose fevered activity was favorably compared to that of an “anthill.” This stock character in colonial literature was intended to convey the gregarious and servile character of the Annamites.97

What the authorities of the protectorate discovered in 1935 was therefore nothing less than inconceivable: once passive spectators and prisoners of their villages and age-old traditions, the “natives,” whether peasants or nobles, had suddenly become agents of change who were capable of acting directly upon local society and transforming it from the inside. Not satisfied with freeing themselves from these supposed shackles, they did not hesitate to issue demands and make recommendations concerning colonial policy. The incredulity and blindness of the authorities, like the evolutionary certainties of the authors of the period, arose from a general framework of colonial ideology that established the intrinsic superiority of the Western bourgeois model of civilization over those of exotic societies. This ideology alone was enough to legitimize France’s expansionism and civilizing mission.98 Thus, these writers and colonial officials were only applying to Vietnamese society a paradigm that presented itself as ordained by the natural order of things because universal and infallible.

Perhaps even more surprising is the potential risk for misinterpretation when this ideological framework is used after the fact as the only analytical lens through which to view colonization. For example, Hy Văn Lương, a North American anthropologist specializing in Vietnam and author of a notable monograph on a village in Phú Thọ province, writes: “In the province of Phu-Tho the capitalist sector of the economy consisted principally of French tea and paint plantations in the hilly parts of the province, a tea-processing plant in Phú Hồ, and a small pulp mill in Việt-Trì. The plantations were set up on land conceded to French settlers and Vietnamese collaborators, concessions amounting to 10,969 hectares, or approximately 22% of the province’s cultivable land in the 1930s (Phạm Xuân Đạo 1939: 62-63; Henri 1932: 23).”99 The author, falling victim to his own eagerness to expose

97. When Yves Henri, the inspector general of agriculture in the colonies, evaluated the necessary workforce for a French tea plantation of 500 hectares in 1932, he described the “natives” much like a horse trader: “1,500 coolies (men, women, children), or three per hectare, which is the normal number on plantations in Assam.” Henri, Économie agricole de l’Indochine, 595.

98. This undeniable blindness was fed by a series of presuppositions that were raised to the level of postulates, which the political and scientific elite would repeat after each aborted attempt at directed population migration: the unflagging attachment of peasants to their village (their “homeland”) and their local customs, as explained by economic, psychological, social (status), and spiritual factors (cults, superstitions); atavistic fear of altitude and unhealthy climates; the fact that people from the plains perished in the absence of rice paddies; and lack of individual initiative and the need to be guided and organized, etc. A detailed analysis is provided in the introduction and third chapter of Tessier, “Le pays natal est un carambole sucré,”1-29 and 164-244.

99. “In the province of Phú Thọ the capitalist sector of the economy consisted principally of French tea and paint plantations in the hilly parts of the province, a tea processing plant in Phú Hồ, and a small pulp mill in Việt Trì. The plantations were set up on
the unacceptable yoke of colonialism, advances a mistaken historical narrative by establishing a fallacious causal link between two statements. The first is the list of large French and Vietnamese concessions located in Phú Thọ province in 1938. This list does indeed figure in Phạm Xuân Đỗ’s work but does not distinguish between the different types of crops that were being grown on the various plantations. The second is the list of lands where tea and Chinese lacquer trees were planted, also provided by Phạm Xuân Đỗ but only as a partial census and, above all, one that never suggests that these were European plantations. In other words, Hy Văn Lương is trapped by his own interpretation of the colonial system, which depends upon an assumption elevated to the rank of axiom: that the capitalist sector of the economy was necessarily owned and operated by French colonists. He never imagines that it could be any other way. Decolonizing the mind requires questioning the legitimacy and relevance of the conventional conceptual framework that has directed the definition of the problematics and objects of study. In other words, one must subscribe to the principle of “rupture” as defined by Pierre Bourdieu and his colleagues in 1968, the scope of which extends beyond the limits of sociology: “Apprehending an unexpected fact presupposes at least the decision to devote methodical attention to the unexpected, and its heuristic value depends on the pertinence and cohesion of the system of questions that it calls into question.”

Working exclusively within the primary sources of the colonial archives produces a trompe l’oeil decor, a deformed and biased image of the mass movement I have called the “tea revolution.” There are at least three reasons for this. First of all, the impressive amount of documentation produced under the directorate adopts a “top-down” perspective that was necessarily biased because fed by the aspirations of a centralized system of domination that was imposed by force and which was teetering under the stress of a dual crisis: the international crisis of 1929, synonymous with recession for both Western and colonial capitalist economies, and the profound crisis of identity and legitimacy that were revealed by the demands for nationalism and independence by the colonized inhabitants of Indochina. Second, the archival documents dealing with the expansion of the plantation economy in Phú Thọ province reflect self-centered preoccupations that were cut off from local realities and which primarily sought to camouflage the dysfunctions of the chain of command and the errors made by the different administrative and technical agencies involved. In doing so, they convey the illusion that it was possible to exert full control over rural society. Finally, these documents provide a portrait at once fragmentary, biased, and opportunistic. It minimized local dynamics in order


to ultimately integrate them into the rhetoric of progress and France’s civilizing mission, which by this point no longer included even the most fervent defenders of the colonial model.

Far from providing a reliable account of a specific time period, the archival sources that I consulted act as the written traces of a deliberate manipulation of local social history, a manipulation that would not have been discovered without interpreting these sources through and confronting them with the stories and facts gathered during my fieldwork. This conclusion echoes the words of Paul Veyne, for whom “history is mutilated knowledge. ... The illusion of integral reconstruction comes from the fact that the documents, which provide us with answers, also dictate the questions to us; in that way they not only leave us in ignorance of many things, but they also leave us ignorant of the fact that we are ignorant.”

Olivier Tessier
École française d’Extrême-Orient