RESPONSES OF LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY VIETNAMESE WRITERS TO
THE FRENCH COLONIAL IMPACT

by

TRAN MỸ-VÂN

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To my beloved family

in Saigon, South Vietnam
This thesis is based on original research I conducted as a scholar in the Department of Asian Civilizations, Australian National University, from March 1973 to April 1976.

Trần Mỹ-Vân
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ABSTRACT

The clash between France and Vietnam in the second half of the nineteenth century was more than a military one, for the ways in which the Vietnamese reacted to colonial rule greatly reflected their ethnic background. This study aims to provide new insights into the responses of late nineteenth century scholars to the French impact, through an analysis of their literature. Vietnamese responses took several forms, such as armed resistance, passive opposition, eremitism, collaboration, and defeatism. The thesis discusses the writings of the Emperor and his Court at the time, the poetry of resistance leaders, the reform memorials to the throne of Nguyễn Trọng Tội, and the works of three important Vietnamese anti-French poets. The chief focus is the cultural traits which influenced greatly the thinking and conduct of these men. Confucianism, which they nurtured to a high level, failed to help them to meet effectively the threat of alien forces equipped with technologically superior weapons. For the scholars, writing became the only way for them to render meaningful opposition.

The literature of the time not only reflects the transition from a traditional Confucian society to a more Westernised society, but also illustrates the bitterness, frustration, and agonies of the scholars in the face of unprecedented chaos. Most significantly, the literature expresses their bitter denunciation of French colonisation, exploitation, and oppression; it also contributes great support to the resistance movement and is a source of inspiration to later generations of Vietnamese.
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INTRODUCTION

Located on the eastern seaboard of the Indochinese peninsula, Vietnam (formerly known as the "Malee to the Western" and the "Crossroad of Southeast Asia"), was a victim of the strategic position. The country was vulnerable to invasion from the sea because of the "Long coastline" and because of its original shape, which left only a narrow stretch of land joining the North and the South. Vietnam has been likened to a banana pulse laden with fruit and with a heavy basket of rice, the bulk of the narrow, mountainous backbone of Annam and the two banana ends the large, rich, rice bowl of the Red River and the Mekong.

Vietnam was conquered by China in 111 B.C. and remained under Chinese political and cultural domination for almost a thousand years. The successful recovery of independence from China, the Vietnamese were able to develop a unique identity, although they still paid periodic tribute to China.

The Chinese pattern of state organization, used Chinese of the official language and, above all, retained control with Chinese culture, the Vietnamese began to rebuild their cities and traditions. When the Chinese attempted to reoccupy the Empire of Annam - in Vietnam was then called - in the eleventh century.

General of Tên Khiêng Kinh, in the absence of his deputy,

The Emperor of the South called over the rulers and ancestors of the Southern country.

"This country has been registered in the historical book."

Now call Yen, Subsequently thanh, How to pronounce it.

You will undoubtedly have your own and respective talents.

of Tên Khiêng Kinh (1125-1152) was an outstanding strategist and a great warrior of the eleventh century. He opposed the Song lines on the occasion when his troops were trying hard to recapture the Red River across the Malee River. He had the poem recited during the night, making his own battery that the river God was opening. Following up, the soldiers' morale was lifted and they became the Chinese.
Located on the Eastern seaboard of the Indochinese peninsula, Vietnam became known as the 'Balcony to the Pacific' and the 'Crossroad of Southeast Asia', on account of its strategic position. The country was vulnerable to invasion from the sea because of its long coastline and because of its unusual shape, which left only a narrow stretch of land joining the North and the South. Vietnam has been likened to a bamboo pole laden at each end with a heavy basket of rice; the pole is the narrow, mountainous backbone of Annam and the two baskets are the large, rich, rice deltas of the Red River and the Mekong.

Vietnam was conquered by China in 111 B.C. and remained under Chinese political and cultural domination for almost a thousand years. The successful recovery of independence from China infused the Vietnamese with national pride and a desire to preserve their own identity. Although they still sent periodic tribute to China, followed Chinese patterns of state organization, used Chinese as the official language and, above all, remained imbued with Chinese culture, the Vietnamese began to remould their customs and traditions. When the Chinese attempted to reconquer the Empire of Annam - as Vietnam was then called - in the eleventh century, General Lý Thường Kiệt stressed the separateness of his country, from China and the strength of national feeling:

The Emperor of the South rules over the rivers and mountains of the Southern country.
This destiny has been registered in the Celestial Book.
How dare you, barbarious stock, come to violate it.
You will undoubtedly meet your own and complete defeat.

Lý Thường Kiệt (1019-1105) was an outstanding strategist and a great politician of the eleventh century. He composed the above lines on the occasion when his troops were trying hard to repel the Sung Army across the Nhị Ngụyệt river. He had the poem recited during the night, making his men believe that the River God was speaking. Believing so, the soldiers' morale was lifted and they defeated the Chinese.
Nguyễn Trãi echoed these words in the fifteenth century after successfully repelling the Ming:

...Our Great Viet is a country where prosperity abounds,
Where civilization reigns supreme.
Its mountains, its rivers, its frontiers are its own;
Its customs are distinct, in North and South....
Over the centuries,
We have been sometimes strong, sometimes weak;
But never have we been lacking in heroes.
Of that let our history be the proof.  

Thus, in this spirit of independence the Vietnamese lived, stressing the maintenance of moral principles and the fulfilment of traditional duties, rather than the need for change and economic development.

Having learnt only to counter threats from culturally similar countries, mainly China, the Vietnamese were ill-prepared for the encroachments of Western imperialism. News of the victories of the West over the Middle Kingdom, followed by the opening of its ports for Western trade, greatly disturbed the ruling class in Vietnam, but failed to waken them to the need to make defensive preparations. French ambitions in Southeast Asia were spurred by a desire to compete with other Western powers, and secure an area somewhat like the 'Indian Empire' of Britain, where France could exert her prestige and create a market for French goods. Indochina, with its strategic location, fitted well into French dreams of expansion. In addition, the French thought the occupation of Vietnam was 'the easiest thing in the world; it also offers tremendous results. France has more than sufficient forces in the China Sea to carry out this venture'.

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2 From the Proclamation of Victory over the Ming (Bính Ngô Bất Caế). The translation is taken from Ralph Smith, Vietnam and the West, London, Heinemann, 1968, p. 9. Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442) was a renowned scholar, and a close adviser on strategy and politics for Lê Lợi, who became the founder of the Lê dynasty.

The encounter between Vietnam and France was not simply a military and political clash, but was a collision of cultures possessing entirely different values and motivations. Thus the traumatic effects of French imperialism went far beyond the opposition between traditional and modern societies, for the cultural gulf between the two countries was unbridgeable:

To think of traditional Vietnam as culturally comparable to medieval France or England would be a serious error. The nature of Western social and intellectual traditions made possible, from about the seventeenth century, developments which in time were to place European and Asian culture still farther apart: the 'scientific' and 'industrial' revolutions.  

The arrival of the French, a totally non-Confucian race, marked an end to an era of isolation in Vietnam and brought her whole world view into question. In many spheres the differences between the Vietnamese and the French were irreconcilable: in religion, technology, government, and philosophy. The Christian religion of the French upheld Jesus Christ as the Saviour - devotion to whom eclipsed in importance loyalty and service to the country. To Vietnamese ideologists, everything in Christianity seemed opposed to the ideals of Confucianism.

The gradual, military success of alien invaders shook the foundation of Vietnamese society - the very foundation where Confucianism was supreme, the King ruled, the scholar-officials administered, and the local scholars spread knowledge and guidance to the people. Adjustment to the changes imposed by French colonial rule was painful and shocking to the Vietnamese and many perished rather than accept the destruction of the time-honoured order.

The traditional motto - 'The scholars are responsible for the

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4 Ralph Smith, *Vietnam and the West*, p. 7.
country's rise and fall' (quốc gia hùng vong thất phu hữu trách) - explicitly placed duties of a more or less political nature on the gentry class.

Opposition to the French took many forms. While the Nguyễn Court routinely asserted that righteousness and faithfulness would triumph, others chose to oppose the French through literature, through subversive activity, or through open revolt. Yet, because of their inability to prevail over the enemy, many scholars were driven to the act of withdrawal, the conventional form of protest, while a few called for reform as a necessity for progress and a condition for survival.

This thesis aims to cast new light on the Vietnamese literati in the French colonial period - the times in which they lived, the problems they faced, the precepts they held, and the decisions they made. More specifically, this thesis seeks to extend and broaden our understanding of Vietnamese responses to the French colonial impact by examining the literature of late nineteenth century:

From time immemorial the Vietnamese have always been those who employ spears when on horseback, brushes when sedentary. The scholar-gentry compose poetry, so do the commoners. They write for victory. Even in the face of execution they have sufficient courage, patience, and inspiration to make a few verses. With or without papers and brushes, still they manage to write either to incite the nation to patriotism or to immortalize their names and spirits.5

These words convey some impression of the similarities in aims of nineteenth century Vietnamese literature. Sometimes written by scholars, sometimes composed by commoners, the literature of Vietnam in the French colonial period very often was a vehicle to convey the writers' political and intellectual stance, to

influence opinions and actions, and to ensure the remembrance of posterity. Although the written literature of the time best-known today is the folk literature which was transmitted orally, it was an important part of the culture of the Vietnamese people. The oral literature comprising sayings, proverbs, songs, and stories—sometimes in verse—was the fountain-head of written literature and reflected the people's fight for survival against hostile nature, feudal oppression, and invaders.

Written literature, though rarely published during the lifetime of the writers, was commonly transmitted orally, though sometimes it was only circulated within the family or the circle of scholars. Although works were often written in Classical Chinese, the nineteenth century was the period when the use of Nôm in the writing of poetry and prose was highly developed. Nôm was a kind of ideographic script employed to represent the Vietnamese spoken language and, although scholars regarded it as a less fashionable medium, Nôm had the advantage of being widely understood when read aloud.

Despite the political overtones of much of the literature of the time, it is important to remember that writing was a traditional pursuit—never a commercial undertaking—and was almost the expected pastime of scholars. Writing was for personal satisfaction and self-consolation as well as to educate the populace, but never to please the general public. Writing flourished particularly in times of upheaval, and was frequently very personal in orientation, expressing an author's thoughts and emotions and the impact of events on himself.

The second half of the nineteenth century was a turning point for Vietnamese literature. The French conquest, which ended with the capitulation of the Nguyễn Court, gave rise to a patriotic literary
movement. More than ever before, the scholar-gentry were deeply concerned with the political, cultural, and social problems of their times. More than ever before, literature was used as a vehicle to transmit thoughts. Since the period produced many famous writers and a voluminous literature, the task of this study has been to analyse the work of a number of writers, whose prose and poetry exemplifies important political themes. I have chosen four individuals for study, namely Nguyễn Trưởng Tố, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Nguyễn Khuyến and Trần Tế Xương. In French eyes, these four men were not at all dangerous, or important, or influential and they posed no positive obstacle to the French task of establishing colonial rule. However, the French certainly underestimated their political minds and the effects of their literary weapons.

Nguyễn Trưởng Tố's memorials to the throne furnished valuable plans for nation-wide reform. The defiant attitude and the ardent patriotism of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, as expressed in his poems, provided a climate beneficial to the spreading of agitation and propaganda in any fighting campaign. The philosophy of withdrawal adopted by Nguyễn Khuyến is quite alien and possibly meaningless to the Western outlook, but it certainly was well taken by the Vietnamese as a meaningful sign of protest against the discredited Vietnamese government and the French rulers. Trần Tế Xương was a spokesman for the younger generation and his satirical poems emphasized the desirability of the old order against the new.

In the thesis a chapter is devoted to the writings of each of these men. Two other chapters discuss the actions of the Court, together with the heroic response arising from the alien threat and the various calls to arms. The policies of the Court provided the subject matter of much of the literature, and today they are
sources of historical controversy. Thus this thesis discusses official and unofficial responses to French incursion and examines the impact of events on the actions and outlooks of the scholar class, as exemplified in the work of four writers who represent major points of view. Throughout the thesis the emphasis is on the literature of the time to discover how insights into events may be gained from such source materials.

There is a great amount of published material in French, and some in English, on Vietnamese culture and society as well as on French intervention and colonial rule in Vietnam. However, it is surprising how little has been written about Vietnamese literature composed during the French colonial period. I have hence relied heavily on the original text of poems and other writings published in both North and South Vietnam. The books containing the poems rarely provided information about dates of composition and few contained explanatory or analytical material. Thus one of the contributions of the thesis is to present translations and interpretations of portions of Vietnamese works which have previously been unavailable in English. My being Vietnamese has greatly assisted me in understanding material whose meaning could be obscure to people less familiar with Vietnam’s language and culture.

Moreover, I have examined foreign intervention and impact from a Vietnamese point of view which may provide fresh insights to those accustomed to Western interpretations.

A major problem in the translation of Vietnamese poetry into English arises from the nature of the Vietnamese language itself. Vietnamese is a mono-syllabic language with a richness in tone, multiple meanings, and musical characteristics. More important, its nouns have no case, no gender, no singular, and no plural; while
its verbs have no tenses and no mood. Hence it would be unsatisfactory to attempt to translate word by word. The need to render meaningful translations has inevitably destroyed the rhythm and beauty of the original. Some of the most serious problems lie in the literary allusions, veiled metaphors, and morals conveyed in the poetry.

Virtually all translations in this thesis are mine, and the few taken from other sources are acknowledged. I should admit my incapacity to evoke all the candour, the simplicity, and the mood inherent in the poetry of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Nguyễn Khuyên, Trần Tế Xương, and the other scholars. Yet, in this study, the emphasis is more on content than on style, and poems and passages are selected more for their instructive value than for their beauty.
CHAPTER I

OFFICIAL RESPONSE TO THE FRENCH INCURSION

French intervention in Vietnam took place at a time when the country's rulers had been pursuing an isolationist policy in the face of pressures from outside powers, and a revolutionary and extremely turbulent scene in domestic affairs. The historical setting is fundamental to the understanding of the scope of events after the coming of the French and the policies or positions which this intervention brought to Vietnamese authorities. This chapter describes the historical setting and also presents a brief overview of the nature of Vietnamese society in the pre-colonial years, as this background is very important to an appreciation of the language, imagery, and ultimately, content in the work of the writers discussed in later chapters.

[Further content...]
French intervention in Vietnam took place at a time when the country's rulers had been pursuing an isolationist policy in the face of pressures from outside powers, and a reactionary and strongly Confucianist course in domestic affairs. The historical setting is fundamental to the understanding of the turn of events after the coming of the French and the kinds of reactions which this intervention evoked from Vietnamese scholars. This chapter describes the historical setting and also presents a brief portrayal of the nature of Vietnamese society in the pre-colonial years, as this background is very important to an appreciation of the language, imagery, and philosophy contained in the work of the writers discussed in later chapters.

BACKGROUND

The country occupying the Eastern part of the Indochinese peninsula first became known as Vietnam in 1804. This was when Nguyễn Ánh, a member of Nguyễn seigniorial family, with the help of French advisors, succeeded in reunifying the country from North to South under his rule. He proclaimed himself Emperor Gia Long, an impressive title to commemorate his reconquest of the country. The word 'Gia' is taken from 'Gia Định', the name of a region in Southern Vietnam, whilst 'Long' is taken from Thăng Long (Hà Nội). He transferred his capital to Huế, where he built his imperial palace, 'The Great Within' (Đại Nội), inside a Vauban fort of vast proportions. He also secured a new tributary seal from the Chinese Emperor, Chia Ch'ing, who confirmed both the new name of the

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country and Gia Long's title by official proclamation in 1804.\(^2\)

Being the founder of the Nguyễn dynasty, Gia Long tried to strengthen the unity of his country by all available means. As Professor Woodside has pointed out, Gia Long and his successors Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức, looked to the great power lying to the North, China, for a model of policy and state organization, and followed this model more faithfully and successfully than earlier Vietnamese rulers.\(^3\) It should also be said that it was the Sung Neo-Confucianism that the nineteenth century Vietnamese monarchs, mandarins and scholars, solemnly adopted as a legitimate doctrine, fundamental to their culture and government. Especially it was Chu Hsi's interpretations of Confucianism that influenced their behaviour and thinking, ironically at the very moment they had to face an unprecedented challenge from the West.

Non-involvement with the West was the cornerstone of the Nguyễn rulers' foreign policy, not because they believed that the West had nothing to offer, but because of its different ethics and its lack of a similar cosmic philosophy. In other words, the Nguyễn rulers found little to recommend the 'barbarians' and into declined to enter/trade or commerce with them. Emperor Gia Long, despite his gratitude to the French, especially Bishop Pigneau, for helping him to power, granted no trading privileges to any Western country. Once, he stated the reason: 'The red-haired people are sly and tricky... they are of a different race and so are their hearts.'\(^4\)

\(^2\) For more information about Chia Chi'ing's letter to Gia Long concerning the given details, see Bùi Cận, Quê Huyền Như Tự, Saigon, Phú Quốc Vụ Khánh Văn Hoa, 1969, pp. 114-120.


Furthermore, the Nguyễn rulers were content with what they possessed and inherited. They reasoned that the past was better than the present and the old values were superior to the new ones. Above all, their Confucianism, which stressed the cultivation of virtuous conduct, the maintenance of order and harmony in human relationships could be employed effectively to eliminate problems. It was not that they were biased, for what they saw first-hand in the followers of Christianity, made them unwilling to welcome anything from the West. For example, Emperor Gia Long was terribly shocked and upset when his young prince, a student of Bishop Pigneau, refused to kneel down in front of the ancestral altar—a serious violation of the official creed. Afterwards Gia Long openly expressed his view to Pigneau that Christianity should adopt the cult of ancestors—the basis of proper behaviour. As the Emperor explained, it inspired filial piety from children, and gave their parents authority; without it there would be disorder in the household.5

Gia Long's successors, Minh Mang, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức, believed that the French 'barbarians' were not worthy of respect, for in ethics they knew nothing about the Five Relationships of Confucianism, while in philosophy they knew nothing about the Yin Yang concepts and the Five Elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water). The closed door policy (bế quan toán cảng) reflected the Nguyễn rulers' rejection of Western ideas and their desire to remain isolated from Western influence. For over fifty years (1802-1858), they maintained this course, and were able to rule their own country and pursue the domestic policy they believed in.

The King ruled the country by the Mandate of Heaven. Being the son of Heaven, he possessed both celestial sovereignty and terrestrial

authority. 'Like a Supreme God he makes out all regulations and
decrees; he changes the rules if required. The King is all-powerful;
he is even endowed with the power of mercy.'\(^6\) He alone had the right
to offer sacrifices on behalf of his nation to Thượng Êê (Heaven) and
to the lords of souls. He was also the father and mother of all his
subjects. His people had to obey him absolutely with unqualified
respect and loyalty. Opposition to the King was bound to bring
chaos and disorder for the state and therefore was intolerable.
The death penalty existed for rebels and sometimes for three whole
generations of a rebel's family (Tru Di Tam Tộc).\(^7\) Uninvited
approach to the King's palace, his garden, the royal tombs, or a
royal cortège, or having a secret liaison or relation with any
member of the harem meant death as well.\(^8\) Anything related, subjected
or belonging to the King and his imperial family had to be addressed
as long (dragon), thánh (sacred) or ngọc (precious). For example:
long thể (dragon's body), thánh chi (sacred order), ngọc diên (precious
facial expressions). The dragon had always been the symbol of
nobility and power, and the dragon design could be used only by the
King, his princes, and high ranking mandarins. The King and his
harem lived in the cấm cung (the forbidden palace) surrounded by
high walls. There each Nguyễn ruler lived aloof and separated from
his people.

\(^6\) Alfred Schreiner, Les Institutions Annamites en Basse Cochinchine,

\(^7\) For instance the case of Cao Bá Quát, a great poet of the 19th C.
He rebelled against the Court and the King. When arrested he
was executed; his three family generations were also executed.

\(^8\) Quê Quâ Tríệu Phát Luất (National Laws of the Dynasty), Saigon,
Luật Khoa Đại Học Ân Ng, Articles 52 and 61, p. 40-41.
The Nguyễn King's direct contacts were limited to the ministers, counsellors, and officials who were known as Quan (Mandarin), who formed the Court. The country itself was divided into provinces, then into districts and villages; other Quan were appointed to conduct the administration. These Quan had acquired reputations for their great virtue and knowledge by passing one or more of the three academic degrees, namely Tu Tài (Bachelor of Talent), Cử Nhân (Man of Elevation), and Tiên Sĩ (Advanced Scholar). Study for these degrees entailed absorbing the wisdom and moral teachings of the Chinese Classics. As a result of their training these scholars rarely desired novelty or adventure. With their knowledge of philosophy, literature, history, and moral codes, the scholars enjoyed great prestige and were the top ranking social class. The farmers were the second ranking class, followed by the artisans; the traders were regarded as the lowest class.

The relationships between King, Mandarins, and people emphasised the social gulfs between them. To the King the mandarins or scholars or officials were obliged to render great respect and submission: When the Court was in session a mandarin had to prostrate himself five times before the King, then remain kneeling with head bowed low. He had to hold out both hands to receive things, to thank the King he had to bend himself to the floor, and to withdraw he had to back out so that he did not turn his back to the King. When standing, a mandarin had to stand at the side, he dared not look up at the long nhan (dragon's face) nor dared he make any move. Yet in his own domain, the power of each mandarin was great. Schreiner reported:

Nguyễn Văn Phong, La Société Viêt-namiêne de 1882 à 1902, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1971, p. 120.
They were the fathers and mothers of the administered. The people had to obey their mandarins and give them respect and love. Their relationship was theoretically a parent-child relationship.\(^{10}\)

Behind this tiny ruling class were the great majority of common people. Most of them were bound to the agricultural land of their forefathers. For centuries they used the same techniques to till their land. As there existed in Vietnam a tradition of village autonomy, the peasants were more bound to their local authorities than to the central government. This is illustrated by a Vietnamese saying that 'the rules of the King give way to the regulations of the village' (Phép vua thua lê làng). At the same time, the commoners were prepared to be influenced by Buddhist monks, Taoist masters and usually by the local Confucian scholars, who were believed to have great knowledge, even knowledge of the future. The prestige of the scholar class was a great incentive for people to aim at enabling their sons to attempt the mandarinal examinations, for academic success was the way to social advancement.

During the Nguyễn dynasty the country suffered great adversity; there were droughts, floods, cholera and, worst of all, repeated breaches of the dyke system in the Red River Delta. These calamities plunged the people into misery. In addition, there were rebellions against the King throughout the entire country. According to the account of The Annals of Đại Nam (Dai Nam Thục Lục Chính Biên), the Nguyễn dynasty faced more rebellions and uprisings than ever recorded in the history of any Vietnamese dynasty. During the period from 1802 to 1862 there were 405 rebellions and uprisings: 73 under Gia Long; 234 under Minh Mạng; 58 under Thiệu Trị; 40 under Tự Đức.\(^{11}\) Although these rebellions were usually crushed, they succeeded in

\(^{10}\) Schreiner, Les Institutions..., p. 225.

\(^{11}\) Đại Nam Thục Lục Chính Biên, dẽ tam và dẽ tu kỳ, quyền 4 và 16. Trần Văn Giàu, 'Sự Phát Triển Chua Tôt Thường Việt Nam, Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1973, p. 51
shaking the security of the country and disrupting the economy which was already stagnant. The factor which gave rise to most complaint was the corvée - a system of compulsory labour enforced only upon the poorest class of peasants (dân). The corvée system took the men away from their families, and far away from their villages. They experienced hard labour, poor feeding, and low pay. Throughout this period the Nguyễn rulers sought to reconstruct the country. This included the building of a 'Mandarin Road' to link the North and South of the country, grandiose citadels and impressive fortresses. Obviously all this required an intensification of the burden of corvée labour. The people complained bitterly about this and also about the tax system, which they considered unfair. While the mass of people had a hard life and even soldiers were ill-fed, the royal family led a life of extreme extravagance. A few figures clearly illustrate the contrast. While the best miner received only three coins (quán tiền) and one bucket full of rice (1 ph abandonment găo) each month, the numerous wives of the King, who were given ranks from number one to number nine class, received high salaries. The highest rank of wife received yearly payments up to 1000 quán tiền, plus 300 units of rice, 60 rolls of silk, and 48 dresses. Even the lowest ranking received 180 coins, 286 units of rice, and 12 rolls of silk. Naturally the salaries and allowances of the princes and princesses were much higher still.

Emperor Gia Long had founded the Nguyễn dynasty, and should have taken advantage of his contact with the West and his knowledge of Western warfare to modernize his country. But he only learned from them enough to restore his position. Once on the throne he

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concentrated on safeguarding his own position. His successors did likewise. Gia Long was lucky in not having to face invasion from the West; however, his successors were less fortunate in this respect. They had to face the full force of an expansionist and technically sophisticated military power. The more threatened the Nguyễn rulers felt, the higher they built their walls of isolation. To them, this was the best way to prevail over all foreign influences. Within the country, out of fear of Western political and military interference, the court and the mandarins continued to oppose and persecute Christian missionaries and their converts, who were regarded as the roots of disorder. At the same time, they tried to reinforce Sino-Vietnamese cultural stability by urging people to live up to the Confucian ideals.

It fell to Tự Đức, who ascended the throne in 1847, to confront a desperate situation arising partly from profound catastrophes within the country and more particularly from the incursion of a foreign power. Even Tự Đức's throne was threatened by the uprising of Prince Hồng Bào, who claimed to be the legitimate ruler. Indeed, suspecting that the French missionaries supported Bào's claim, Tự Đức issued an edict on March 21, 1851 imposing the death penalty on all foreign and Vietnamese missionaries. As a result, the missionaries, claiming to be caught in the 'Tiger's claws' (Griffes du tigre) in Vietnam,¹³ made urgent calls to France for protection. They also made a desperate appeal for France 'to avenge her injuries and to avenge the loss of French blood' (venger ses injures et venger le sang Français).¹⁴

¹³ From the letter of Mgr. Detort to Montigny, who in 1858 attacked Hà Nông. Taboulet, La Geste..., p. 394.
¹⁴ From the letter of Duke Bourboulon to the French Minister for Foreign Affairs. Ibid., p. 386.
Tu Duc (1829-1883)

'If faithfulness and sincerity are expressed,
Fierce tigers pass by
Terrifying crocodiles swim away.'
Whatever their motivations - to protect the Christians, to liberate the Vietnamese from the most abominable tyranny, or to expand French influence - the French began active intervention in Vietnam in 1858. The key concern of this chapter is to see how the Confucian-rooted Nguyễn Court, and in particular Emperor Từ Hiệu, faced the French invaders who were totally non-Confucian in background.

It has been said: 'In their piece-meal invasion of Indochina, they [the French] were aided as much by the defeatist policy of the Vietnamese government as by the superiority of their arms.' There is no mistaking the validity of this. The primitive Vietnamese armoury of sharp sticks and ineffective guns provides a concrete and documented explanation of the fall of the country. But the full evidence puts much of the blame on less tangible factors, like the posture of Emperor Từ Hiệu. His policy of appeasement requires fuller explanation as it is rooted in the cultural traditions of the Vietnamese nation. Moreover, the personality of Từ Hiệu and the mandarins who helped him shape this policy need to be taken into account.

Emperor Từ Hiệu 'had the historical misfortune of being a really accomplished Confucian scholar and poet, with more than an average passion for traditional values and methods of reasoning'. This remark is very valid judging by the overall conduct of Từ Hiệu in state management, administration, and diplomacy. Furthermore, what one should not overlook was Từ Hiệu's failings as a leader, especially at a time when determined leadership was essential. This point is

15 Trương Bửu Lần, Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention: 1858-1900, Monograph Series No. 11, SEA studies, Yale University, 1967, p. 7.
illustrated in his dealings with the French and with his own subjects, from Cochinchina to Tonkin, through the whole twenty-five years of French conquest and domination.

COCHINCHINA

From the very beginning, Emperor Tự Đức seemed prepared to involve his people in a military struggle against the invaders, right from the fall of Kỳ Hòa citadel (February 1861), which was one of the strongest fortifications in Cochinchina and was commanded by the renowned General Nguyên Tri Phương leading a force of about 22,000 soldiers. Tự Đức's resolve was strengthened after the loss of Định Tương two months later. He then ordered the reinforcement of Bình Hòa and sent orders to provincial officials for the recruitment of men who were skilled warriors and tacticians. In an edict to the people he instructed as follows:

For the past three years the French have ravaged Gia Định, destroyed fortresses, killed people. They are different from us altogether, they oppress our people, violate our women.... Let any who are disgusted by these actions, follow my banner. Rally under one single force.... I shall receive you warmly and together we shall drive the French out of the provinces. When peace follows our victory, I shall reward you generously. 17

When Nguyễn Túc Trung and Bổ Trúc Tịnh, two high ranking mandarins in Central Vietnam, offered to go South with their men to reinforce the southern troops, Tự Đức was most pleased. He declared 'their genuine hearts deserve admiration.... Therefore, I employ them to encourage and to heighten their spirits'. 18 The Emperor also encouraged the recruitment of more soldiers from Central Vietnam for the fight against the French. The ways in which Tự Đức, aloof

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17 The edict was written on 1 March 1861. See Trương Bá Căn et al. Kỷ Niệm 100 Năm Chống Pháp, pp. 155-156.
18 Phan Khoang. Vietnam..., p. 159.
in his palace, ordered his people and officials around reflected
his desire to protect his country from French invaders. But it also
reflected his Confucian expectation of their service to the
endangered country.

Within the Court, the Emperor sought advice from his closest
associate, Nguyễn Bā Nghĩ, Grand Councillor in charge of Bình Hòa
province and Liason Officer for French business negotiation.
Nghĩ believed this was the only way to save Cochinchina's four
remaining provinces, whereas fighting would expose Vietnam's
weakness and encourage the French to be more aggressive. His
attitude rested mainly on his experience of having seen fast
French warships and efficient guns destroy five official copper-
coated junks within a few hours in Đà Nẵng. In a message to
Emperor Tự Đức, he repeated his opinion:

For the past three to four years, our army has not
been weak, our guns have not proved ineffective, our
fortresses are thick, but still we lose. It is all
because their ships and cannons are superior to ours.19

Other advisers, Võ Đức Nhĩ, and Phạm Thánh, fervently believing
in the power of Confucian canons to sway the thinking of people,
even the thinking of the French, counselled Tự Đức to write a
letter of protest to the French appealing to orthodox Confucian
principles. Yet again, the group of Phạm Hữu Nghĩ, Tô Trần, and
Hồ Sĩ Tuấn advocated aggressive resistance as the best course, to
save Vietnam from foreign trade and heretic religion. Trương Âng
Quê and Phan Thanh Gian, two most prominent Grand Councillors,
recommended no aggression nor negotiation, only defense. As the
decision of the Court was divided, Tự Đức found it hard to make any
firm decision. He merely made a call for firm action20 and did no

19 Ibid., p. 162.
20 Tự Đức expressed his wish that they should be like 'firm,
standing trees fearless of the strong, blowing wind.'
more. At the crucial time when there was a great need for firmness and guidance from a national leader, Tự Đức demonstrated incapacity and allowed events to take their course.

While this vacillation between war and peace went on at the Court, the French Admiral Bonard ordered an attack on Biên Hòa, which fell on 16 December 1861. The citadel of Bà Rịa followed on 7 January 1862. On hearing this news Tự Đức reprimanded and downgraded the officials involved, including Nguyễn Bá Nghị, for their irresponsibility. He issued an edict to the effect that:

Anyone who can regain a district or a town will be made chief of that district or town.
Anyone who can repulse the enemy and control an area will inherit that area as a royal benefit for generations.
Brave soldiers will be rewarded.... We call everybody to exert all his might to resist. Then the enemy will be disturbed and will not dare stay in our land.21

These words reflected Tự Đức's underestimation of French ambition. He seemed to believe that the invaders would withdraw from Cochinchina once they faced determined opposition.

Vinh Long Citadel - built in Vauban style surrounded by fortresses and carefully set obstacles - fell to French heavy artillery, a disaster which shook the confidence of the Court and sapped even the morale of the war-factions. Consequently, the Court accepted Admiral Bonard's proposals for negotiations. The conciliatory stand seemed appropriate to them then, as it offered a way to halt French encroachment and allowed the Nguyễn officials to concentrate on quelling domestic rebellion in the North.

Phan Thanh Gian and Lâm Duy Hiếp, two leading scholars whom the Emperor believed the French would respect, were appointed to negotiate with the French. After taking the imperial drink (Ngũ Thủ) from the Emperor himself, the two envoys left for Saigon having

21 Phan Khoang, Vietnam..., p. 165.
received no firm instruction, except that they should try their best.

The result was a twelve section treaty signed on 5 June 1862 which allowed religious freedom for the Catholics, the cession of Bình Hòa, Gia Định, Bình Thăng Provinces to the French, and the payment of 4,000 million piastres of indemnity by the Vietnamese. The two Vietnamese negotiators had had an impossible mission and upon their return were dishonoured. Their Emperor cried: 'How painful it is!... You are not only criminals in the eyes of the Court but also in the eyes of the whole generation.'

There was no mistaking the pain and grief of Emperor Tổ Độc. However, he made no effort to reverse the terms of the treaty, nor did he order his people to fight the French. His passivity can be interpreted as a reflection of his deeply rooted belief in Confucianism, which stressed the superiority of the cardinal virtues of benevolence, righteousness, sincerity, and respect over violent action. This pattern of thought found expression in Tổ Độc's friendly and courteous diplomacy towards the two Western envoys who came to Huế for imperial approval of the Treaty in February 1863. The French party were warmly welcomed and were carried on palanquins, which were normally reserved for mandarins. The treaty itself was also placed in a small palanquin, protected by a parasol as a sign of special honour. As a concession to Western customs, the French envoys were even allowed to wear their swords in the royal palace and were excused the kotow — things unthinkable in the mind of

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23 Nguyễn Duy Quang, Chinh Dung Phan Thanh Giản, Saigon, Bồ Văn Hòa Giáo Dục, 1974, p. 146
Vietnamese mandarins. A banquet was laid out for them, followed by an exchange of gifts and solemn expressions of everlasting peace and true friendship from both sides.

No source indicates who initiated and sanctioned this generous treatment and obtained Tu Duc's approval. However, the explanation of these actions may lie in the different policies of the Nguyễn Court towards more serious contingencies. If possible, they wished to avoid all contact with the 'barbarians'. Failing this, they considered that the 'barbarians' could be pacified if they were treated with benevolence and sincerity.

To convince the French of his good faith, and more particularly of his own earnest wish to end the fighting, Tu Duc called the resistance leaders into submission. His belief in the power of goodness and of virtue was seen again when he sought to send a mission led by Phan Thanh Gián to Paris to negotiate the purchase of the three lost provinces from the French. His motives in this were more psychological and emotional than political, because Tu Duc was reported shedding tears when talking to his mandarins about his intention:

That land, that people are the long-toiled product and development of my predecessor. Therefore, I ask you try your best so as to save me guilt and worry.

The guilt and worry expressed above stem from the Confucian ideas by which Tu Duc lived. He felt he had betrayed the trust of his

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24 This contrasts with the treatment of Lord Macartney at the Ch'ing court in 1793, who was censured for refusing to kotow. For the famous letter of the Chinese Emperor to King George III, see Backhouse and Y.O.P. Bland, *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914, pp. 322-325.

ancestors, by failing to preserve his heritage and thereby detracting from his good name as a pious son.

The National Dynasty Records (Quốc Triều Chinh Biên) reveal that the Emperor ordered local products of top quality to be brought as gifts, and he followed Trần Đình Túc's advice in giving his Ambassadors extra gold and silver to ensure the success of their mission. Such actions may have reflected Tự Đức's hearkening back to how well the Chinese had received such gifts and ceased to threaten his country's territorial integrity. Alternatively, Tự Đức may have been attempting to demonstrate Vietnam's wealth to convince the French that 'peaceful relations' would bring them Lộc (prosperity). Tự Đức's choice of Gian to head a party of sixty-six persons reflected care and thought, as Gian, the first scholar from the South to win top honours in the Imperial examinations, had served three Emperors (Minh Mạng, Thiệu Trị, and Tự Đức) in the best tradition of the mandarinate, and was highly respected. He was the very embodiment of loyalty and Confucian rectitude. Furthermore, Gian, being a Southerner, would be more deeply concerned with the loss of his native country to foreigners and therefore would try his best to retrieve the Southern provinces. Indeed, Tự Đức probably made the best choice available to him, as Gian made a profound impression on Captain Rieunier, the Commander of the boat Européen which took the royal envoy to France. Commenting on how well the aged Gian withstood the hardships of the voyage, Captain Rieunier wrote:

26 For the list of all the names and positions of all the mission members, see Nguyễn Duy Quang, Chọn đúng..., pp. 175-176.
The noble, old gentleman... is borne up by his ardent patriotism and strengthened by his desire to render a great service [to his country].

The mission was solemnly welcomed in Paris and given an audience, first with the French Minister for Foreign Affairs and then with the French Emperor, who declared: 'La France est bienveillante pour toutes les nations et protective des faibles.' Moreover France seemed willing to allow Vietnam to redeem her lost territory. The imperial envoys, Gian especially, with 'admiring curiosity' were most impressed with the grandeur of France and also with its mechanical and technological civilization. In his Diary of the Mission (Tây Ký Nhật Trình), which he kept every day, Gian wrote:

Since our mission arrived here at the French Capital We see their developments; we cannot help feeling perplexed.

The amazing developments which Gian saw were sealed roads, trains, bridges, and the gas lighting system. In wonder he observed:

...The roads cut through mountains and over rivers. However many rivers there are, there are that many bridges... At the point where a river is wide and deep, The floating bridge is still constructed regardless of the cost... Compared to oil lamps the white gas lights Shine for miles amazingly. Birds cannot fly, horses cannot gallop over the distance of 500 miles which can be covered within a day [by the railway system].

However, when Gian's party returned in March 1864, they could report no positive achievements, as the discussions with the French had been couched in vague terms. During an audience with Emperor Tu Duc, Gian

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27 J. Taboulet, La Geste Française en Indochine, p. 489.
28 Ibid., p. 490.
29 Ibid., p. 488.
could only report: 'Their [French] wealth and strength are beyond description' and he concluded: 'Under Heaven, they can achieve anything, except the matter of life and death.'

The words stress the overwhelming impact on Gian of French material accomplishments. The Emperor however was unimpressed by Gian's reports, and continued to insist on the power of the Confucian virtues, which he believed Gian possessed. Tự Đức presented the following poem to Gian upon appointing him Viceroy of the three Western provinces, Vĩnh Long, An Giang and Hà Tiên:

...If faithfulness and sincerity are expressed.
Fierce tigers pass by,
Terrifying crocodiles swim away.
Especially with sensible people
You should have no doubt (that they will understand you).
Everybody accepts goodness.
Everybody listens to righteousness.
Everybody admires correct words.
Everybody gives into knowledge and determination.
No one will exert pressure on your iron will.

Gian, well acquainted with the might of French technology, could see no hope in the simple adherence to Confucian principles advocated by his Emperor. This attitude found expression when Gian was persuaded to come out of his fortress for talks. Meanwhile the French launched a quick assault. Thereby they seized Vĩnh Long, An Giang, and Hà Tiên in a bloodless victory (June 1867); Viceroy Gian had ordered no defence. The mandarin's role in this tragedy was the result not of neglect of duty but of a deliberate decision not to sacrifice the people under his care in a battle which was bound to end in defeat. His letter to his subordinates explained his decision:

The empire of our King is antiquated. Our gratitude to our Kings was always profound and fresh and we cannot forget them. But now the French have come against us with their powerful war materials. We are too weak for them. Our

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32 Nguyễn Duy Oanh, Cần Dung Phan Thanh Gian, p. 192.
33 Ibid., pp. 195-196.
leaders and our soldiers have been defeated. Each fight brings more misery. The French have enormous warships, groups of well-armed soldiers, and heavy cannons. No one can resist them. They enter where they will and even the most powerful fortress falls to them... I deserve Death. You, mandarins and people, can live under French rule. They are only terrible in war. But their flag may not be allowed to fly above the fortress while Phan Thanh Gian is still alive.34

The seventy-four year-old viceroy managed to avoid seeing the tricolour float in victory, by undergoing a hunger strike for fifteen days, then taking poison. He took his last breath after having instructed his two sons not to work for the enemies. Gian also sent a farewell note35 to the Emperor along with the twenty-three royal awards given to him over the years. This is typical of the attitude of a strict Confucian official. His suicide was a way to reconcile benevolence and loyalty. Gian believed that if his people submitted to the French without struggle, there would be no wasted bloodshed. However, his own integrity forbade him to submit himself. Furthermore, as a subject, his death is the socially sanctioned way of expressing repentance over his failure to carry out the task entrusted to him.

Tu Duc and his Court reacted more severely to Gian's failure than to the French annexation. They made him a scapegoat, emphasising principles and ignoring practicalities. Also they did not accept his suicide as a redeeming action. To them, Gian lacked trung (loyalty), and for this he was to receive posthumous punishments to set an example for the young generation. His name was drilled out of the engraved gold slab of honour for doctoral scholars, all his titles were cancelled, and, worst of all, the death penalty

34 Ibid., p. 253.

35 For the complete farewell note, Ibid., pp. 260-261.
(trăm giam hâu) was laid on him. 36

While the Court took retaliatory measures against Gia Nhơn, 37 they were in no position to retaliate against the French. The loss of the Southern provinces placed the Nguyễn Court in a hopeless military position, requiring them to accept their losses and seek peace with the French as the best expedient. On hearing the news of the war between France and Germany, Tự Đức sent a letter to the Governor of Gia Định, General Cornulier, expressing his wish for a French victory. When the French were defeated, another letter was dispatched, bearing Tự Đức's hope for a quick and successful recovery from France's difficulties. However, there was still a double-edge to this friendly attitude, because in this second letter Tự Đức also suggested negotiations concerning the return of the lost provinces if the General needed to bring his troops back to guard his own country. The French General not only refused this thoughtful suggestion but firmly stated that France was capable of maintaining her forces in the conquered land.

Once again the masters of the foredoomed Vietnamese showed their lack of perspicacity and an ability to adapt themselves in the modern world dominated by the superiority of Occidental technology. 38

For the ten years from France's initial attack on Gia Định to its control of the whole of Cochinchina Tự Đức's policy remained inflexible. He continued to insist on using the cardinal virtues

36 For the official discussion between Tự Đức and his mandarins about Gia Nhơn and his failure, Ibid., p. 317.

37 Not until Đồng Khánh's reign was Gia Nhơn posthumously pardoned for his failure and given back his titles (August 1885).

in his treatment of the invaders, which emphasised his lack of understanding of the French.

TONKIN: THE FIRST PHASE

The Court of Huế did not learn from its experience in Cochinchina and again fell into the trap of trusting the French; this time the cost was Tonkin. The story began with Jean Dupuis, a bold, French adventurer who had come to China to seek his fortune in trade. Having realised the commercial potential of the navigable Red River, he urged the Vietnamese authorities to allow him to use it to transport supplies of salt and weapons to Ma Ju-lung, a Yunnanese General. His disdain for the Vietnamese authorities was total. He threatened to kill them all 'like dogs' if they stood in his way. He ordered his ruffians to seize all the official parasols, tear down all proclamations and march them in mockery through the streets before burning them all. He also ordered the beating up of any Vietnamese seen wearing official robes. He justified his actions by claiming that these mandarins, engaging in opium smoking and debauchery, sought only to oppress the people, take their money, and sell 'justice'. He professed to believe that the Tonkinese would like to be made 'free people' by French 'liberators'. The Vietnamese authorities reacted to Dupuis' lordly attitude with forced tolerance and appealed impatiently to the French in Saigon, believing that a French intermediary would be best able to end Dupuis' activities.

Admiral Dupré dispatched Captain Francis Garnier to Hà Nội.

39 It was a custom in Vietnam to place an official proclamation, made by a high mandarin, under the shade of a parasol for public notice.

While the Vietnamese authorities anticipated that Garnier would settle the unpleasant business of Dupuis, Garnier’s presence only created more turbulence; upon his arrival in Hà Nội he rode through the streets, went straight into the citadel with fifteen men, and demanded the citadel itself as a lodging place. Marshal Nguyễn Tri Phương, the aged and influential Grand Mandarin from Huế, to whom Tự Đức had entrusted the Governorship of Hà Nội, watched Garnier with bewilderment. Phương noticed in Garnier a haughty attitude and a complete lack of understanding, if not respect, for Vietnamese customs. However, Marshal Phương, in accordance with his Confucian training, which required him to treat the enemy with respect and sincerity first, extended due courtesy to Garnier, hoping too, that in this way he would not jeopardize discussions. Then he put up a notice to inform the people that the prime task of the French mission was to expel Dupuis and that they should not approach the French envoy as he had no power to interfere in Vietnamese problems. Garnier, believing he was insulted publicly, replied by putting up his own proclamation which, in a very provocative manner, corrected the Marshal for misinterpreting his mission. He stated that, on the contrary, the mission had the totally

41 For a detailed and important biography of Francis Garnier, see Roger Vercel, Francis Garnier à l’assaut des Fleuves, Paris, 1952.

42 Garnier wrote to his wife about this encounter as follows: ‘When I got on board, the Vietnamese authorities welcomed me, then led me to a lodge, near the sentry box. However, I and my group went straight into the citadel, claiming that we would only rest at the residence of the Governor... On our way the Vietnamese repeatedly tried to stop us but were unable to do so.... I went through the gate and straight to his residence. The Governor had no time even to put on his official robe. I have to admit that this old man, already 74, knew how to react smartly and spontaneously. He showed courtesy and uttered some broken French, hiding his anger under a smile and gentle words.’ Quoted in Bảo Đảng Vy, Nguyễn Tri Phương, Saigon, Bộ Văn Hóa Giáo dục, 1974, pp. 187-188.
different purpose of opening the Red River to international trade and placing it under French protection. A few days later, on 16 November, 1873, Garnier put up another proclamation which began 'The Great Mandarin Garnier' (Le Grand Mandarin Garnier), whom the Government of Cochinchina sent to discuss trade, has decided 'From now on the Red River is open to the trade of France, Spain, and China from the sea of Yunnan.'

Boiling with rage at the French trick, Nguyễn Tri Phương ordered the proclamation to be torn down without delay and then put his citadel on a state of alert. However, on 19 November before he could summon his force of 7,000 men to action, he received an ultimatum from Garnier urging acceptance of French conditions and disarmament of the citadel. When there was no reply, Garnier, assisted by Dupuis and a force of 180 Frenchmen, stormed the citadel. Within one hour the tricolour was already flying over the citadel to signal the French victory. The Vietnamese suffered heavy casualties.

Marshal Phương was arrested but on the verge of dying from a wound caused by a shell splinter. However, he maintained his opposition to the French. He spat out the food and medicines which the French put in his mouth, and by tearing up his bandages he bled to death. The tough old man even refused to speak, his silence indicating that Garnier was regarded as being no match for him, even though he was on the winning side. This is a typical way in which Vietnamese mandarins kept face in defeat. Only the presence of Monseigneur Puginier induced

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44 Jean Dupuis, Le Tonkin..., pp. 158-159. 80 dead, 300 wounded, 2,000 captured. Phan Liêm and Phan Tôn, two sons of Phan Thanh Gian, whom the French regarded as arch enemies were also captured.
him to cry:

Can't you let me die in peace? You ought to be satisfied, for it is thanks to the advice of your missionaries that the French have robbed us of Cochinchina, and are going to rob us of Tonkin. What I want more than anything else is to die as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{45}

News of the sudden fall of Hà Nội, of the sacrifice of Nguyễn Tri Phương and the killing soon afterwards of Francis Garnier by Liu Yung-fu and his Black Flags\textsuperscript{46} plunged the Huế Court in perplexity. Emperor Ti Duc made the following remark to his mandarins:

When the French Governor General decided to dispatch his man to Hà Nội I believed in his good will, so allowed his man to go there and receive a friendly reception. As it turned out he was wicked, dishonest, and caused more trouble. It is confusing... but then I feel that in this matter there was some interference by the Governor General.\textsuperscript{47}

In these words Ti Duc seemed to have a vague perception of French trickery. However, he did not know how to respond.

When Philastre, an outspoken opponent of Garnier's aggression, was empowered by the French government to settle the Tonkin affair, he offered the Court the return of their captured Northern provinces. The Nguyễn Court was delighted, especially Ti Duc, who saw this as a vindication of his peaceful approach and who once again let Confucian thought pervade his judgement. He was deeply touched to find that the French knew how to conduct themselves on Confucian lines.

Philastre's action was viewed as a sign of respect, and certainly caused Ti Đức to say the following words:


\textsuperscript{46} For detailed information about Liu Yung-fu and his Black Flags, see \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 98-112.

\textsuperscript{47} Trần Văn Giàu, \textit{Sự Phát Triển}, p. 432.
Foreign relations should be based on trust and respect. Twice France has requested a peace treaty to re-establish the old relations, so that everybody may be happy. Everything they do is to keep their honour with other countries. For instance, when their envoy odiously occupied four provinces and exceeded his orders, then upon the word 'principle' the provinces were returned to us without any request. I hope that from this incident they will gradually return to us all they have taken. In this way they show that they do not take others' property for themselves and that they can be righteous (nghĩa) and thereby gain benefits.48

Tự Đức's total ignorance of the nature of French imperialism revealed itself in these words. It seems that it hardly occurred to him that he and his Court were dealing with a completely non-Confucian enemy. Among his countrymen, Philastre was exceptional on account of his understanding and admiration of Vietnamese culture, but Tự Đức made the mistake of believing that he was typical of the French ruling class. This encouraged Tự Đức to trust in Confucian ways to secure the return of Cochinchina and later agreed to enter into a one-sided Treaty with the French in 1874.49

Although France failed to obtain Tonkin, she could hardly be called a loser in this affair. By putting the crimes of their aggressive compatriots to excellent use, the more moderate faction of French Colonial officialdom at last gained Vietnamese recognition of all the French conquests in the South.50

To his people who were angry at this new submission, Tự Đức gave the following explanation of his seemingly imprudent attitude:

A conciliatory stand is our national policy,
Why fight when there is no hope of victory?
To fight when there is no chance of winning is not fighting...
In terms of ideals, truly we should fight, but in terms of practicalities there is nothing as good as taking a conciliatory stand. This enables us to turn danger into safety, negative into positive, our people can be

48 From the edict Khiến Trạch Viện Thường Bạc vọ viên Thừa Thiên Phú, in Tự Đức Thánh Châu Văn, Sài Gòn, Phú Quốc Vu Khánh Văn Hoa, 1971, p. 44.

49 For the preparation and whole text of the Treaty, see Tabonlet, La Geste... , pp. 738-747.

unharmed, the country free of worry and care; 51

In these lines Từ Đức maintained that his great concern was for the safety of his people, but he voiced his mistrust in the fighting capacity of his people. However, it can also be noted that Từ Đức's traditional attitude to international diplomacy persuaded him that a humble attitude of submission would spare Vietnam from further French aggression.

TONKIN: THE SECOND PHASE

Six years passed without renewed aggression from the French, but in the early 1880's events moved swiftly towards a crisis. A mandarin official, Nguyễn Hoàng in his report brought news to Từ Đức of new French pressure and of a French naval buildup around the port of Hải Phòng which the mandarin interpreted as a sign that the French were planning to occupy Hà Nội. At first Từ Đức, weakened by illness, refused to believe this for he had signed a Treaty and was convinced that the French would keep faith. 'There is a Treaty that binds the two countries, how can France alone decide to violate it'. 52 He even reviled the Mandarin for coming. 'Thus Nguyễn Hoàng utters slander: He is a criminal in the eyes not only of Vietnam but also of France.' 53 It seems that Từ Đức did not fully appreciate the situation: the French had full control of the South, together with military bases in Hải Phòng and Hà Nội, the most strategic points in Tonkin. The invasion of Tonkin seemed only a


52 For the complete royal dictum Nghịch Séc Viên Hành Nhân Nguyễn Hoàng, see Từ Đức Thành Chế Văn, p. 233-238.

53 Ibid., p. 237
matter of time, but Tự Đức was more willing to accept the assurances of the French than to trust his own officials.

However, a few months later a Chinese envoy, T'ang T'ing-keng, accompanied by Ma Fu-pen and Wu Tsu-chun, came to the Court at Huế with further news of French military ambitions in Tonkin and information that the French Chamber of Finance had voted to arm an expedition to Tonkin. T'ang advised the Vietnamese authorities to take strong action against this threat. Only then the Nguyễn Court became alert. Nguyễn Văn Thống, President of the Board of Revenue, on behalf of Emperor Tự Đức besought T'ang to plead with his own Chinese Emperor to have pity, and to protect the Vietnamese. At this stage Emperor Tự Đức, beset by his illness and tormented still by his own incapacity, turned earnestly to China for assistance, invoking China’s moral obligation to her vassal country. By so doing Tự Đức played into the hands of the French. When he sent a mission of three ambassadors to China carrying the royal seal and tributary gifts, the French used this action as a pretext for attack, since Vietnam had violated the 1874 Treaty, one of the terms of which had been a recognition of Vietnam as an independent state.

In 1882 the French seized the citadel of Hà Nội. Hoàng Diệu, the commander of the citadel, wrote a letter to his Emperor before committing

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54 T’ang T’ing-keng was the Canton branch manager of the Steam Navigation Company, which was used as a screen for the Chinese Mission which was to investigate the Franco-Vietnamese relations and to discuss current issues with the Vietnamese Emperor.


56 Article 2 of the 1874 Treaty: ‘Son Excellence le Président de la République française reconnaissant la souveraineté du roi de l’Annam, et de son entière indépendance vis-à-vis de toute puissance étrangère’. 
suicide. His letter underlines the frustration of a military leader whose efforts to strengthen the country's defences were thwarted by the policy of the Court:

I believe Hà Nội is the throat of the north and the most strategic area of the country. If it collapses the other provinces will also be destroyed. For this reason, I am most concerned. I have tried to reinforce neighbouring areas and I have asked the Court for more military assistance to meet the threat. In reply I have received royal edicts which either reprimand me for being a cowardly military leader or condemn me for misbehaviour. I have read these words with bowed head; they are more severe than axe and hammer....

Their [French] forces are as numerous as ants and their guns boom like thunder; outside the citadel fire is ravaging, inside everybody is horrified. I, in spite of my sickness, tried to fight and lead the army and killed over a hundred soldiers and so was able to keep the citadel for half a day. Because the French are so powerful, our troops are all exhausted due to lack of support. The situation came to a dead end; military officials, fearful of the French, ran away in groups, while civil officials followed in their footsteps. I am all aches and pains. How can I maintain the situation alone?

The central land has fallen into the enemies' hands; if I live I shall feel ashamed to face scholars from the Imperial City. Therefore, I vow my loyal heart to the citadel and pursue death so that I can follow the noble spirit Nguyễn (Tri Phong) to the underworld. 57

As Hoàng Diệu had feared, the fall of Hà Nội was followed by the capture of the provincial cities of Nam Định, Hưng Yên, and Ninh Bình.

The incidents in Hà Nội certainly filled the Huế Court with fear of possible French attacks on its own doorstep. At this stage, it seemed that Tự Đức was led by his advisers as he listened to Tôn Thất Thuyết, the Grand Military Mandarin, who advised him to recruit more soldiers and to reinforce the fortresses around Thừa Thiên. When the French Consul, Rheinart, protested against such preparation Tự Đức said:

Their words, their attitudes are like that, how can we believe them. It is quite normal for any country to

57 Translated from his Di Bieu (Farewell Letter) in Tô Văn Yêu Nước, pp. 150-153.
carry out this kind of preparation; but why are we forced to stop? Is it just to please them? We see now why they have called a stop to all our provincial preparations so that they can cheat us after having entered a peace agreement with us.\(^{58}\)

Too late the Emperor became aware of customary French deceit. But when the mandarin in charge of coastal defence, Trần Tiên Thành, objected to such preparations on the grounds that they were ineffective and only displayed Vietnamese weakness and made the French more likely to take action, the Emperor reversed his original decision and ordered a stop to the defence.

The Court later found consolation in a second victory won by their Chinese ally, Liu Yung-Fu, who had lured Henri Riviere to his death.\(^{59}\) Từ Đức gave his hero the rank of Commander-in-Chief, rewarded him with a mandarinal cap and a gold plaque on which were engraved the words 'Loyalty and Bravery'. Liu's warriors - the Black Flags - and Vietnamese soldiers serving under Hoàng Kể Viêm were also generously rewarded. The recognition given to Liu for his services indicated Từ Đức's thorough approval of his action against the French and his acceptance of Liu on the same terms as a Vietnamese general.

In the North, Liu and his soldiers marched in triumph through villages for many days carrying the heads of Henri Riviere and other...

\(^{58}\) Trần Văn Giáp, Sử Phát Triển... , p. 139. Phan Khoang, Lịch Sử Việt Nam, p. 274.

\(^{59}\) Liu wrote a proclamation in a very provocative manner challenging French soldiers and their leader to fight with his 'terrible soldiers'. Actually the proclamation began as follows: 'The warrior Liu declares to the French: other nations despise you. You have the character of wild animals. Since you have been in Vietnam, you have seized citadels and massacred mandarins. These crimes deserve death. Heaven will not forgive you. McLeavy, The Black Flags..., p. 203.
Frenchmen. In France, news of Rivière's death precipitated a
decision to strike at the heart of Vietnam so as to bring about its
complete subjugation. Thùan An port was stormed on August 15
1883. Fearful of losing their positions altogether, the mandarins
of Huế Court sought to negotiate. They took no time to sign a
harsh, new Protectorate Treaty. During this turbulent stage
Thúc died, ending a reign of complete failure to ward off French
invaders. To add to his 'misfortune', he had not been blessed with
children of his own.

HUẾ INTRIGUE

The death of Thúc plunged the Court into a state of chaos,
which was marked by a struggle for power between the two regents,
Tôn Thất Thuyết and Nguyễn Văn Tưởng. They both reserved for
themselves the right to ratify the ascension to the throne of the
next monarch. The Grand Advisor (Ngạc Phú chẳng), Trần Tiến
Thành, who dared raise his voice against such extravagant exercise
of power, was murdered discreetly.

At least towards the French, the two regents possessed the
same unfavourable attitude. However, the French success in making

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60 It is recorded that Liu seasoned all the heads with salt to
keep them fresh for as long as possible.

61 During the course of debate about events in Tonkin, the Minister
of Foreign Affairs stated: 'All we want is to render uncontested
and effective protectorate in Annam and particularly in Tonkin.' Cited
in Paul Isoart Le Phénomène ..., p. 120.

62 This is called the Harmend Treaty. For its text, see Taboulet,
La Geste..., pp. 807-809.

63 Đức, born on 23 February 1852, was nominated to succeed
Thúc by the royal will in July 1883. However he died of
poison on 6 October 1883. Hiệp Hòa, born on 1 November 1847, was
enthroned on 30 July 1883 and reigned until November 29 1883. He
was forced to commit suicide, because presumably he favoured
co-operation with the French. Kiên Phúc, born on 2 February 1869,
reigned from 29 November 1883 to 31 July 1884. He died of poison.
Hồ Nghi, born on 3 August 1871, ruled from 2 August 1884.
the Chinese drop their claims of suzerainty in Vietnam was forceful enough for Tư_CONTEXT_ to confirm, on 6 June 1884, the establishment of a French protectorate over Annam and Tonkin. Hereafter Tư CONTEXT_ entered more contacts with the French. At the official protest of Rheinart over the enthronement of Emperor Hạnh Nghĩa without French consent, he presented himself at the French residence to express his apologies. He also agreed to write a document, seeking French permission for this enthronement. As the document was written in the unofficial language of Nôm, Rheinart turned it down, and Tư rewrote it in Chinese Characters.

Tư's seemingly submissive attitude must have stemmed from his fear of superior French military power, because in one of the discussions with Thuyet about appropriate policy towards the French, Tư was reported to have said:

...Don't you think, if we cause disturbance, we shall meet defeat? The Citadel of Cia Bình, as solid as it was, could not resist the enemies' artillery. The storming of Thuận An port scared everybody....Fighting undoubtedly will frighten our emperor. Therefore, the way to solve the problem is to hand them some land and property to maintain peace. If you think of an alternative and if you believe in its success and in the possibility of securing peace again, may I leave the whole business to you alone.

In marked contrast with Tư, Regent Thuyet remained a strong opponent of the French. Quietly he prepared for the resistance, accumulating supplies and weapons. He sent out secret orders to exterminate collaborators and Catholic converts. His provocative manner aroused irritation on the French side. The Minister for

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64 This is the so-called Patenôtre Treaty signed by Patenôtre and Nguyễn Văn Tư. For its full text, see Taboulet, _La Geste_, pp. 809-812.

Foreign Affairs, Freycinet, ordered Lemaire, Consul at Huế, to liquidate Thuyêt, or at least exile him. Meanwhile General de Courcy, the new French Commander-in-Chief, believed that he had two ways of settling the whole affair of Vietnam: 'either catch Túòng and Thuyêt, or strip them of their destructive power'. Thuyêt was de Courcy's main target and he knew it. Thuyêt's feigning of illness to avoid meeting de Courcy heightened the tense atmosphere.

French effort to exert their power became apparent when they compelled the Court to surrender to them the camel seal and to melt it down publicly in their presence. This seal which the Chinese Emperor had bestowed upon Gia Long in 1804, was a symbol of Vietnamese submission to China. The French insisted upon its destruction to indicate that France now was the successor of China as suzerain of Vietnam. But most shocking of all was de Courcy's demand, upon his arrival, that the Emperor Hân Nghi descend from his throne to welcome him and that the Ngo Môn Gate be opened for him and his officers and armed soldiers. This arrogant French demand rode roughshod over the traditional ritual which placed the Emperor in an exalted position over his subjects and over foreign visitors also. The Ngo Môn gate was normally used only by the Emperor, and the mandarins would not dream of entering the Court armed. Another blow to the royal tradition of courteous diplomacy was de Courcy's refusal to accept the gifts presented to him by the Queen Mother and Emperor Hân Nghi.

Finding this situation repugnant, Thuyêt ordered a full attack on French troops that night (5 July 1885) without informing Hân Nghi.

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66 Gosselin, L'Empire d'Annam, p. 197.

67 The seal was made of silver and gold. It weighed 5 kg 90 and had a picture of a hand holding a camel engraved 'Seal of the Vietnamese Emperor'.
This sudden move represented Thuyệt's patriotic effort to save the face of the Court. It was a matter of dignity regardless of the risk or the outcome. It was also an attempt at self-preservation, for he had good reason to fear that the French would kill him. Moreover, the fact that Thuyệt had prepared for this resistance for over two years, demonstrates his determination to defend the heart of the country.

The attack failed. Hạm Nghi and members of the royal family including Tam Cung68 (The Three Queens), escorted by the two regents, had to flee. On the way to a refuge, regent Tượng was ordered by the Queen Mother to return to the imperial city to negotiate with the French. However, he surrendered at Kim Long Church69 and put himself at the mercy of de Courcy. Tượng then had to sign a declaration, drafted by de Courcy, charging Thuyệt with conspiracy and requesting all royal members, including Emperor Hạm to Nghi and the Three Queens, to return to the Court. On 13 July de Courcy himself also wrote a letter to Hạm Nghi asking him to return.

Tôn Thất Thuyết now escorted Hạm Nghi farther into the mountainous area at Tấn Sở, whose geographical location would be better suited to the development and continuation of royal resistance. At this stage, resistance, to Thuyệt, was only solution to maintain some territorial integrity or at least to render one's service to the country. That this non-collaboration was both firm and also rooted in his Confucian background is well illustrated in his statement at his

68 The three Queens include Tủ Dữ, the mother of Emperor Tự Đức; Hoàng Thái Phi, the third wife of Tự Đức and Trang Y, adopted mother of Đức Đức.

69 Tượng presented himself to Monseignor Caspar, who led Tượng to meet de Courcy.
farewell meeting with Phạm Nghị’s party:

To return to Huế is just like throwing ourselves into a jail, whose wardens are the French military. To accept the 1884 Treaty is to offer Vietnam to the enemy. It is true that peace is precious but if we do not try to save our country, we shall face the charge of neglecting the long-toiled kingdom and generations of everlasting shame.

There at Tân Sở, in Quảng Trị province, Thuyết helped the Emperor launch the Hích Cận-Vương (Aid to the King Appeal). Thuyết now did what he should have done decades before - namely, bring about the withdrawal of the Emperor from Huế into the mountains and call for assistance throughout the nation. Coming too late, his actions were hopeless because by then so much of Vietnam had been lost to the French.

Thuyết had made a mistake in leaving the Tam Cung at Quảng Trị, because the latter soon decided to go back to the luxury of their palace rather than suffer the rough life of the jungle. Their reappearance in the imperial city saved French authorities from the great embarrassment of having no royal figure to rule; their return facilitated the French effort to set up a new regime. With their consent, the young Sông Khánh was put on the empty throne on 19 September 1885 as a French puppet. His enthronement was celebrated at the French residence. His readiness to co-operate with the conquerors was reflected in his first royal deed. This was a letter which he wrote to the French government expressing his wish to maintain peaceful relations with France. Then, to acknowledge gratitude to his benefactors, Sông Khánh endowed de Courcy with the Royal title Bào Hợp Quản Vương (Duke Protector).

70 Ibid., p. 44.
71 For the English translation of Hích Cận Vương, see David Marr, Vietnamese Anti-colonialism, pp. 47-49.
72 Ibid., p. 43.
and made de Champeaux Bao Hợp Công (Count Protector). Henceforth Vietnamese Court relations with the French became calm and placid. On the occasion of the lunar New Year, de Courcy and his troops presented themselves at the royal palace to give their best wishes, and when the Emperor went on tour he was escorted by French soldiers. At French request, Đặng Khánh even dispatched his own troops to quell residual Vietnamese resistance to the French. He also called on Hân Nghi to surrender.

From this time on, Nguyễn monarchs were unable to rule independently, having lost their decision-making powers to the French. The control of the traditional rulers of Vietnam greatly assisted the French in consolidating their influence, even though the prestige of the Emperor, in the eyes of many Vietnamese scholars, had sunk beyond redemption.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an overview of the attitudes and actions of the Nguyễn authorities in the face of French armed intervention, the outcome of which was the total loss of Vietnamese independence.

Tự Đức's conduct towards the French was consistent with Confucian philosophy: The lối (propriety) inspired Tự Đức to treat the French with courtesy and friendliness and to honour them through rituals and ceremonies, even though he grieved at the incursion of French authorities. The tìn (the mutual trust) which Tự Đức rigorously observed, virtually led him to trust French promises and to keep his own word. An extreme example of this is Tự Đức's order for his own troops to quell anti-French resistance upon French request. Furthermore, he often turned to the Chinese Classics for interpretation
of French actions and to seek guidance. He clung to the proposition that 'If you want to be trusted you should first trust others'.

This belief dominated his outlook, even towards his country's enemies:

We always treat them with sincerity. With those guilty of misconduct we try even harder. We dare not misjudge anybody nor dare we ignore people. All we want is to promote goodness among people. In this way our good action is justified.

Seemingly, Từ Đức expected that the French had the same pattern of thinking as himself. This helps explain his tireless and fruitless effort to control a militarily stronger enemy merely by the routine assertion of cardinal virtues, and by appeals to France's own moral standards.

Từ Đức's attitudes and actions reveal major contradictions. For although he believed the French were 'barbarious', he was convinced that they would respond to his thạnh, l ănh, and tDIFF. Moreover, in view of the early failure of his approach, it is difficult to understand how he could cling to the same Confucian-based policy for a quarter of a century. Từ Đức was most likely motivated by a desire to preserve the Nguyễn dynasty and was fearful of provoking the French. It seems he was demoralized early by French military for he abandoned his initial encouragement to armed resistance after the crushing defeat of resistance groups.

In ruling over his mandarins, officials, and subjects, Từ Đức applied the same conduct. Promotion, reward, and punishment for his people rested as much on their moral behaviour as on their political or military achievements. Từ Đức habitually sent out edicts calling for virtue and goodness.

73 Từ Đức, Nghiêm Sắc Viên Hành Nhân Nguyễn Hoàng, Từ Đức Thạnh Chế Văn, p. 234.

74 Từ Đức, Khienie Trạch Viên Thường Bạc và Viên Thừa Thiên Phú, Ibid., p. 47.
upon his subjects to maintain a virtuous life in the face of adversity and to seek the highest levels of self improvement. Tự Đức's attitude to administration stressed moral example rather than the constructive leadership necessary in a time of war.

When rebellion, war, drought, and famine were ravaging the country, Tự Đức offered his people the consolation of Confucian fatalism and he took upon himself a ritual responsibility for these natural disasters. He believed he was the arbiter between Heaven and his subjects and assured them of his constant efforts to improve himself so that he would no longer upset the natural order. When national integrity was challenged by what he considered to be a breach of faith by the French and the well-being of his people was in doubt, and finally when Vietnamese territory was lost to the French, Tự Đức felt a deep sense of guilt, yet claimed that his incapacity to mend the situation was due to his being born under an unlucky star.\(^75\)

Part of his Edict to Officials and Mandarins (Thi Thận Cống) reads:

> We have the heart but lack in virtue. That explains our incapacity to bring happiness to the people, and also the arrival of new troubles. The country has not been prosperous and the people have been suffering. What can we say now...? Once we had to punish ourselves. We dared not enter the Thế Miếu (Royal Temple) as we could not bear to bring our face to look upon our ancestors.\(^76\)

Undoubtedly Tự Đức was sincere in his wish to alleviate the misfortunes of his people, arising from nature disasters, and halt the alien advance in Vietnam. However, the totally outmoded policies of the Emperor and his Court proved fruitless. For his failure, Tự Đức repeatedly punished himself such as by writing self-critical edict and poetry and by refusing to allow the celebration of his

\(^{75}\) See edict 'Khuyên Dân Các Tinh Thần, Ibid., pp. 90-92.

\(^{76}\) For the complete edict, Ibid., pp. 125-127.
fiftieth birthday because his Cochinchinese subjects could not participate.  

Bearing the name Tự Đức (Son of Virtue) may have made him intensely self-critical and thus punished himself all the more. His pre-occupation with personal virtue probably detracted from his effectiveness as a leader.

Tự Đức had the further disadvantage that he lacked top-level counsellors, who were far sighted and capable of handling this unprecedented situation. Vietnam needed such talented men, particularly since the Emperor proved so incapable and was troubled also by permanently physical ailments. Tự Đức's repeated call for his mandarins to share his burden illustrate his helplessness.

On the more immediate issue of making war or maintaining peace with the French enemy, there appeared many diverse voices and ideas at the Court, but nothing forceful or clear emerged. Those who wished to fight the French lacked coherent plans. Tự Đức's best General, Nguyễn Tri Phương, could only assure the Emperor that he would try his best even at the price of self-sacrifice. Even Phan Thanh Giản, whom the emperor believed could render great service to the country on account of his virtue and great learning, was unable to bargain effectively with the French. Being a traditionalist, Tự Đức relied too heavily on the older, supposedly wiser mandarins. When the latter failed him, he did not turn to unorthodox or younger men. The emperor's great disappointment and disillusion with his mandarins and officials found expression in his harsh punishment of Giản, who, unlike Nguyễn Tri Phương and Hoàng Diệu, had made no attempt to wage war against the French.

77 See edict 'Bàn Luận về nghiệt ngữ tuần', Ibid., pp. 128-132.
In retrospect, the loss of Vietnamese independence affirmed the powerlessness of the Nguyễn authorities to expell the 'barbarians'. The Confucian outlook, nurtured so highly by those Vietnamese, did not prepare them effectively to oppose a technologically advanced and implacable enemy. Too late the Court gained an appreciation of the methods and the strength of the French, and early mistakes made it impossible to salvage the situation. Từ Đức himself bears much of the responsibility for his country's defeat, not because he abdicated his duties, but mainly because his learning and upbringing ill-prepared him for the situation into which he was thrust.
CHAPTER II
DEFENDERS OF THE RIGHTEOUS CAUSE

With their government unable to prevent the spread of French influence and authority in Vietnam, the people themselves were forced to find ways of coming to terms with the changing conditions. The outlook of the common people during the initial stages of French intervention was strongly influenced by their Confucian heritage—its value of their culture, though later many of them turned away from Confucianism to their traditional values in their dealings with the French. An aggressive anti-French movement began which possessed a similarity and consistency of purpose from the North to the South of the country, making it possibly one of the first stirrings of modern Vietnamese nationalism.

Also, a considerable amount of anti-French propaganda in written and oral form began to circulate within and outside the areas of initial French contact with the Vietnamese. This literature aimed to certainly win the hearts and minds of the common people to support the cause of the Vietnamese against the French aggressors.

It also preserved the attitudes and tenets of the past, which appeared to be anti-French and which opposed the will of the majority of the people to preserve their land from the aliens.

THE ANTI-FRENCH MOVEMENT

The Southern World (Cambodia) was progressing steadily. Suddenly it was caught in the grip of Western barbarism.

This is how an anonymous writer described the arrival of the French. His poem is believed to be the very first anti-French poem. The French were not referred to as liberators but as barbarians—the same term used by the Vietnamese authorities. The different attitude

The quotation is the first two lines of the poem, which originally had no title, but was attributed by Mr. Ho Van Chao, a native of the Mekong who read it to the compiler. This Poem, "The Mekong Song," Salome, Phu Tho, 1958, p. 17.
With their government unable to prevent the spread of French influence and authority in Vietnam, the common people themselves were forced to find ways of coming to terms with the changing conditions. The outlook of the common people during the initial stages of French intervention was strongly influenced by their Confucian heritage - as was that of their rulers - though later many of them turned away from conciliatory tactics in their dealings with the French. An aggressive anti-French movement arose which possessed a similarity and consistency of manner from the South to the North of the country, making it possibly one of the first stirrings of modern Vietnamese nationalism. Also, a considerable amount of anti-French propaganda in written and oral forms began to circulate both within and outside the areas of initial French domination. The appeal of the literature almost certainly went far beyond its literary merits for it articulated and praised the just deeds (vì¢c nghia), the iron will, and bravery of Vietnamese heroes in their fight against the French aggressors. It also sneered at attitudes and tendencies which appeared to be pro-French or which opposed the wish of the majority of the people to preserve their land from the aliens.

THE ANTI-FRENCH POSTURE

The Southern World (Cochinchina) was progressing smoothly, Suddenly it was caught in the grip of Western barbarism.¹

This is how an anonymous writer described the arrival of the French. His poem is believed to be the very first anti-French poem. The French were not referred to as liberators but as barbarians - the same term used by the Vietnamese authorities. The different colour

¹ The quotation is the first two lines of the poem, which originally had no title, but was memorized by Mr Hồ Tôn Căn, a native of Gia Định who read it to the compiler. Thái Bach, Thị Tôn Quốc Căn, Saigon, Khai Tri, 1968, p. 17.
of French hair, eyes, noses, beards and their very different body odour made them alien to the Vietnamese. The fact that they come from beyond immense oceans and mountains afar, with their manners of living and eating hundreds of times removed from ours also made them repugnant. The Vietnamese people's abhorence of the French arose initially from many factors, especially racial differences, customs and ethics, and a desire to preserve their own way of life without interference. Soon anti-French feelings were aggravated by the actions of the French: they appeased the people; they noisily intruded into pagodas, temples, and cemeteries. Sacred places which the Vietnamese usually entered with respect, head bowed and bare-foot, were trampled upon by French boots, and sometimes destroyed by their guns and cannons:

Everywhere one sees tombs being desecrated, pagodas destroyed, inhuman actions. Everywhere one hears of houses being burnt, women raped, cruel activities.

or:

Hamlets, villages, pagodas, and shrines are all destroyed. Fortresses fall, walls collapse, bitterness mounts. Innocent blood is shed, corpses float endlessly. God-damn the swarm of cruel Frenchmen.

Their insensitive and cruel actions gave rise to harsh descriptions of the French:

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2 From poem Hịch Kêu Gọi Nghĩa Đi Hành Tây (Despatch urging people to fight the French) by an anonymous poet. It appeared during the early days of the anti-French movement. See Bao Bình giảng and Ca Văn Thịnh, Thế Vệ Yêu Nước Nam Bộ. Hà Nội, Văn Học, 1973, p. 83. Hereafter TVYNNB.

3 Ibid., p. 83.

4 From the anonymous poem mentioned in footnote 1.

5 From Nghị Tính Nghị Đ algumas Di Vệ (Proclamation of brave partisans from Nghị Tính). Thơ Văn Yêu Nước, p. 398.
...The French with barbarous habits have the hearts of dogs and pigs.
Once they dared show their rat-like faces at our open frontier set on doing evil.
Now they demonstrate their wolf-like nature, running around proudly in the plains.

However, some people reacted in a different manner, reporting the French conquest sadly and without such overt hostility. Elegy to the Loss of Gia Định, an anonymous poem, portrayed the deteriorating spirit of Vietnam and the dramatic changes introduced by the French:

How I pity the land of Gia Định!
My regret is deep for the land of Gia Định!
A valley is transformed into a range of hills,
And waves rise where once the waters were smooth.
As their steamships move through rivers,
Smoke swirls for miles, poisoning every one.
Their telegraph poles stretch far and wide,
The citadel [of Saigon] is knocked down to make way for them.

Despite differences in the attitudes and feelings of Vietnamese towards the French - as illustrated in these anonymous poems - refusal to accept French rule was a common theme. On some occasions this determination took the form of a violent reaction against all things French. In fact, when the French troops approached Go Cong in 1862 they found the following proclamation posted on a tree:

Your country belongs to the Western seas, ours to the Eastern seas. Just as the horse differs from the buffalo, we are

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6 Refers to the Vietnamese colloquial expression 'Trốn chui nhu Chuột' indicating the French ran away sneakily like rats at the appearance of Vietnamese troops.
7 Refers to the incident in Bà Ninh (1847) when the French from their ships shot into the port of Bà Ninh for the first time.
8 Refers to the French conquest of Cochinchina.
9 For the complete poem, see TVINHB, pp. 80-81. In this source the poem was recorded by an anonymous writer. But Thái Bạch, in Thơ Văn Quốc Cổm, p. 224, wrote that it was written by Phan Văn Trí.
different in language, literature and custom. If you persist in holding up a torch for us to follow, trouble will not be long delayed.\textsuperscript{10}

The warning of violence became a reality when the French furthered their conquest of Cochinchina. They came up against Vietnamese hostility, which truly alarmed Bonard. This French admiral consequently had to write to his Minister, Chasseloup-Laubat, for reinforcements:

L'insurrection est partout... Je déclare en mon âme et conscience que poursuivre l'œuvre avec les moyens actuels, est ruineux et compromettant pour l'honneur de la France. Il faut porter l'infanterie de marine à six bataillons, la cavalerie à 500 hommes... l'artillerie à 700 hommes, le Génie à une compagnie complète de 150 hommes, la gendarmerie à 100 hommes, envoyer les chirurgiens nécessaires...\textsuperscript{11}

Bonard's call was well-founded because there existed widespread guerilla activity conducted by resistance leaders such as Trương Đình, Hồ Huân Nghĩp, Nguyễn Hữu Huân, Nguyễn Trung Trực, Phan Liêm, Phan Tôn, and Thiện Hồ Vũông. Even though these leaders received very little material support from the Court, which was committed to a policy of appeasement, they succeeded in gaining sufficient financial and military assistance from the people to keep up their struggle throughout the sixties and seventies. However, it is difficult to judge the underlying motivations of the common people as they were probably a mixture of many considerations, such as political and ideological values, fear of social disintegration as a result of colonialism, the prospects of wealth and glory. Above all, resistance was to them a necessary prelude to the return of normality and order. It was a spontaneous outburst expressing dissatisfaction and hatred for those who caused turmoil in the country.


\textsuperscript{11} Taboulet, La Geste..., p. 480.
Since the resistance was a just war, people believed that the Almighty Creator of the world, who was aware of events on earth, would intervene on the side of justice, and so would help them to gain victory.

Heaven will never let us bear this yoke
Heaven will not allow them a free hand to act.12

In another document we see the same faith:

We know that we act according to the laws of Heaven and that our cause shall triumph.13

SOUTHERN RESISTANCE

One of the fiercest leaders of the time was Trương Công Bình, who was born in Quảng Ngãi, but who had spent his whole life in the South. He had had military experience against the French when they first moved into the South. He was the first leader, after the fall of Biên Hòa, to rally partisans and organize insurrection around Gò Công. The motivation of Bình's insurrection was 'Phan and Lâm sold out the country, the Court disregarded the people's will'14. This indicated Bình's rejection of the Treaty of 1862 and, more important, his criticism of the Court for its seeming indifference to the people's will. Hence Bình refused an offer from the Huế Court to become Lãnh Binh (provincial military leader) in An Giang.

12 From the poem Hịch Kêu Gọi Nghĩa Sĩ Lính Tay, in TVYNNB, p. 83.

13 The document was written in Chinese on a piece of wood which the French found floating down the river near Gò Công. Quoted in Paul Mus, Viet Nam, p. 225, Chesnaux 'Stage in the Development of the Vietnamese Nationalist Movement, 1862-1940', Past and Present, 1955, pp. 63-75.

14 Refers to the Treaty signed in 1862 by Phan Thanh Giản and Lâm Duy Hiệp.
Instead, he proclaimed himself Trung Thiên tướng quân (a Grand General standing between the sky and earth). This title implied Đình’s firmly independent position. He only followed what he regarded as the true call of his country – to free it from foreign invaders. His 10,000 or so followers crowned him with the title Bình Tây sắt ta tướng quân (General for pacification of Westerners and extermination of heretics) – a clear sign that they disapproved of religious freedom for Vietnamese Christian converts, who were described as 'the French from the Interior',¹⁵ because of their association with the French and their activities in furthering French ambitions. Đình and his followers intensified their actions against French nationals and those Vietnamese who chose to live around French posts.¹⁶ Phan Thanh Giản, who acted on behalf of the Court at the request of Admiral Bonard, sent an official note to stop Đình’s resistance. In reply, Đình stated that as long as they spoke of peace and surrender he was compelled to disobey them all. Here, Đình was voicing the Mencius principle that people had the right to rebel when their rulers were acting unwisely.

Dinh’s resistance and his life came to an end when he was betrayed by one of his subordinates, Huỳnh Công Tấn. Đình was unexpectedly assaulted and wounded in the backbone. To avoid capture, he killed himself with his own knife on 19 August 1864. He was only forty-four. When the French searched his belongings, they found a recently written leaflet, dated 6 August 1864, calling

¹⁵ On 'The French from the Interior' vs 'The French from the Exterior' – the invaders, see Võ Đức Hạnh, La Place du Catholicism dans les Relations entre la France et le Vietnam. Tomel, Leiden, E.G. Brill, Chapter VI.

for more suggestions, plans, and ideas for a successful struggle against the French. A part of the leaflet conveyed Đình's unqualified determination to fight, whatever the odds:

Even if we are reduced to making our flags out of bulrushes and our weapons out of bamboo sticks, we shall never stop fighting the invaders.\textsuperscript{17}

The death of Đình was a great loss to the opponents of the French but his spirit was an inspiration to other leaders.

Hồ Huân Nghiệp, Đình's comrade in arms, was a renowned scholar steeped in the Confucian ethic of loyalty and filial piety. During his mourning for his father, Nghiệp set up a hut at the side of his father's tomb to teach students the Confucian Classics. When he was asked to predict the result of Đình's resistance, he stated: 'He who commits a right action does not worry about victory or defeat.'\textsuperscript{18}

This remark gives both an insight into what he considered as 'a right action' or 'a just war' and also indicates his relative indifference to the outcome of his own struggle. Indeed, when he was arrested on 17 April 1864 on a charge of rebellion, he took it very calmly. His firm refusal to reveal the names of his comrades drove the angry French to condemn him to death. On his execution day, when he was led to the guillotine, a French priest took out his cross and offered to save him from execution if he would kneel down and pledge allegiance to the French. Instead, Nghiệp seized the cross and threw it to the ground. When death was near, he arranged his dress and turban in order to show how calm he was. He then read

\textsuperscript{17} Bào Đình Giang and Ca Văn Thịnh, Thổ Vội Vây Nước Nam Bộ, p. 15. This source reveals that the leaflet was translated into French by Father Legrand de la Liraye but no one has found the original.

\textsuperscript{18} From Nguyễn Thông, 'The Story of Hồ Huân Nghiệp', \textit{Ibid.}, p. 184.
out loud his last poem:

How could I refuse to heed the call of righteousness!
Also, being a man, I must keep my loyalty and filial piety.
To live or to die is of no consequence
Pain chills my heart only at the thought of my white-haired mother.\(^\text{19}\)

This poem reduced most of the Vietnamese present at his execution to tears because it explained simply and precisely the driving force behind Nghiep's resistance. He answered the call of his country and acted as a patriot only out of a sense of righteousness. The poem also revealed the dilemma he faced at the moment of death. He was to choose whether to live, in order to protect the family tombs and his elderly mother, or to accept martyrdom in his country's cause.

In retrospect, knowing that Nghiep's resistance was to fail and he was to be executed at the age of thirty-six, one may ask whether Nghiep should have submitted to the French and so fulfilled his duties as a son. But one fact stands out. This is that his preference for death with honour rather than life under French domination was shared by his colleagues who were noted for their struggles and for their personal bravery.

One such resistance leader was Nguyễn Trung Trực, born in Tấn An, who succeeded in burning the French battleship Espérance (11 December 1861) on Nhật Tao river and also reduced to ruin the French outpost at Kiên Giang. Early in 1868 he was arrested, and was soon to face death in the same manner as Hồ Huân Nghiep. Paulin Vial, a lieutenant in the French colonial army, reported that when Trực was before Colonel Piquet, the colonial inspector in charge of the inquiry into his resistance, Trực showed his firmness of character and patriotism. Actually Trực requested to

be executed as soon as possible, because he said: 'My fate has come, I failed to save my country.'\textsuperscript{20} He left behind a four line poem expressing his unyielding spirit and his everlasting hatred of the French:

\begin{quote}
During childhood I practised soldiery as well as scholastic pursuits. 
Now, the sword is at hand, backed up by an untarnished spirit. 
[But] The hero runs into an unfavourable situation, 
He hence for ever bears a deep hatred for his arch-enemies.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

But what left an indelible impression on the Vietnamese was his declaration, in reply to a French offer, 'When the French rid the soil of Vietnam of its last blade of grass, the Vietnamese will stop fighting.'\textsuperscript{22}

Nguyễn Hữu Huán, who had a distinguished record for his repeated efforts at resistance against the French, chose a similar fate. He was arrested in June 1863 for harassing French troops in the ceded province of Mỹ Tho, but was soon released. In June 1864 he was re-arrested and sent to Réunion.\textsuperscript{23} The following year the French released him, thinking he had changed his ways, but he resumed his guerilla activities because the French had by then extended their conquests. Between 1872-1874 he won great fame throughout Cochinchina as he was the last outstanding resistance leader. His final capture came late in 1875. The French, angered by his toughness, put a yoke around his neck and sat him on the roof of a house-boat to parade him in public. It is recorded that he showed no fear and was indifferent towards his impending death. He even composed a final poem: \textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{20} Phạm Văn Sơn, Việt Sĩ Tâm Biên, p. 198. 
\textsuperscript{21} and \textsuperscript{22} Thọ Văn Yêu Nâđa, p. 382. 
\textsuperscript{23} In TVYNBB, p. 234, Huấn is reported to have been sent to Bourbon Island, where he spent seven years. 
All you who stand on both sides, do you see that it is
The fulfillment of the three bonds and five relationships
which causes me to bear this yoke,
Under which my noble body suffers heavily
And my proud neck is burdened.
[I prefer] Death and return to the North with shining fame
[To] life in the South with no name at all.
Success or defeat depend on fate.
You betrayers, I both curse you and dare you to laugh at me.

Before the French could execute him, they found that Huân had already
bitten his tongue and was dead.

This preference for death over life, as it was upheld by this
group of Southern resistance leaders, has its roots in the hallowed
Vietnamese maxim 'Chết vinh hơn sống nhục' (It is better to die in
glory than to live in shame), which served as a guideline for almost
all Vietnamese heroes in the final phase of their struggle or in
their captivity. Truly everybody values a long life, but as a
general rule, the patriotic heroes of the time cherished a life
free from a troubled conscience: if they chose to live under the
French, they had no choice but to accept the latter's pattern of
life and thereby compromise their Confucian values. That was what
the heroes referred to as 'to live in shame' or 'a slavish life'
(sống nhục) and what they did their utmost to avoid. Besides:

Everybody must die some day. to be
But to die like a loyal citizen is/crowned with eternal fame.

These two lines were to remind people of the fame or shame which would
descend on them for generations depending on their personality and
actions when dealing with the French enemy.

The choice of death to avoid the French was an extreme form of the
patriotic movement in Vietnam, as many sought freedom from French

25 Refers to people standing along two sides of the river, watching
Huân on his route to be executed.

26 From the poem Hịch Quan Đình. TVYNNB, p. 72.
domination in flight. For after the French occupation of the three Eastern provinces a process of resettlement (phong trảo tài địa) took place to the Western side, reflecting a desire to be free from French influence. Sometimes this resettlement included not only the living, but also the dead, for people exhumed the bones of their ancestors and teachers and carried them West to lands untainted by the French presence.

NORTHERN AND CENTRAL RESISTANCE

The scholar-gentry of North and Central Vietnam supported the motives that led the Southern leaders and their followers to ignore the Court's order and to fight against the French. In 1868 they boycotted the Thi Hûông examination as a protest against the Court and later called for a united stand by the gentry and the populace to oust the French. When, for the first time, their territory was threatened by the French with the attack on Tonkin in 1874, they took a firm stand. Ignoring the terms of the 1874 Treaty, they acted with the view that 'This time we fight both the French and the Court' (Phênh nay danh ca Triệu định lần Tây) and embarked on a campaign of resistance and rebellion.

Trần Tấn, Đặng Như Mai, and Trần Quang Căn - all natives of Nghệ An - rallied local people and organized an insurrection which was the first anti-French and anti-dynastic movement in Northern and Central Vietnam. They launched an appeal in the form of a thirty-six line poem calling on people to reject the Court's conciliatory policy, and to continue their fight against the French and the heretics. Their purpose was to preserve their Confucian civilization. Part of the poem reads as follows:
Disgusted with those mandarins, in caps and robes granted by the Court, who believed in, and appeased the French, Angry with the heretics and annoyed with the French, We have to kill them all to feel at ease.

Soldiers and partisans
Put on your armour, we shall then pursue our goal.
If everywhere, everybody is united in heart
Our flags will fly in righteousness (nghĩa),
Our guns will resound for humanity (nhân).
Wishing to get rid of enemies in order to secure peace for the people.
We ask the gods to witness our determination.27

In pursuit of their aim, Trần Tấn and about 3,000 followers harassed and killed Christian converts and missionaries and burnt Catholic villages.

Sharing Trần Tấn's outlook, more scholar-gentry from the four provinces of Ninh Bình, Thanh Hoá, Nghệ An, and Hà Tĩnh embarked upon resistance. They sent a letter28 to Emperor Tự Đức, condemning his appeasement of the French and announcing their determination to suppress all 'devils'. Their reasons were several: First, the land of Vietnam, as its history proves, has never lacked bold and courageous heroes. 'In every ten paces we find fragrant grass and with two such large regions of North and South, how can we be short of geniuses'. Second, the land itself was too precious to surrender: 'Each inch of land is an ounce of gold'. Third, the defeatist movement of the Court went against the people's will, especially against the scholar class. Fourth, the past deeds, the sacrifices of many heroes, were not to be ignored. Above all, 'If we make ammunition out of righteousness and generosity, it would not be hard to recover the territories'. With reference to the military strength of the Vietnamese:

27 For the whole poem, see Thơ Văn Yêu Nước, p. 148. The compiler copied it as it was read to him by Trần Đức Long of Thanh Chương District, Nghệ An Province.

28 For the complete letter, see Thơ Văn Yêu Nước, pp. 410-414.
Today, the forces are almost ready, the stores of food sufficient, the weapons effective, the spears and swords sharp and pointed, the soldiers united in heart and eager to win back the provinces, the generals are full of plans and swear to wipe away all filth and contamination. The forces we have include 100,000 regular soldiers, 7,000 horses, 800 divers, and 6,000 river soldiers. If we oppose the enemies with these big forces, how can they resist? Isn't it right to say, we are sufficient and we are not weak?

Seemingly the scholars believed in their own capacity, and put faith in their forces, because in the same note they used the following language to describe their forces: 'they could fly, float like a river, and be as high as the surrounding mountains and as long as the flowing rivers.'

It is unknown how accurate the claims were about the size of the resistance forces, though clearly the scholars wished to impress the Emperor with their military strength. For Từ Đạt had earlier commented that the resistance forces were like 'fleas dancing on the grass' or like 'grasshoppers kicking the carts'.

Despite the claims and hopes of leaders in Northern and Central Vietnam, the French were again able to attack and take Hà Nội (1882), then the surrounding provinces. Although the French achieved rapid military success, the resistance movement was undeterred and its fervour was even heightened by defeat.

Lánh Cồ, the son of a poor farmer, set an outstanding individual record for boldness and bravery in his struggle around his native province of Sơn Tây. Three times he was arrested by the colonial forces but each time he managed to escape successfully.

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29 For the Emperor's memorandum, see Ibid., pp. 414-419.

30 Lánh Cồ means Military Leader Cồ. No one knows his real whole name.
For seven years (1882-1889) he maintained his fight even though his forces were poorly equipped. His motives were straight-forward - he could not tolerate the way in which the French gradually increased the amount of territory under their control. He described their advance in his poetic leaflet: 'like silkworms nibbling leaves, such is the stratagem of the French'. Nor could he accept the submissive stand of the Court about which he commented most unfavourably: 'Because the supine Court was so eager to survive, it surrendered and gave the enemy freedom to crush (the resistance)'.

In common with other resistance leaders, Cơ had a high sense of duty and stressed the need for self-sacrifice and strong action:

Being a citizen of a country, you have to work to keep it, Not just stare at it with wide-open eyes. Having a body, you have to sacrifice it too, Not just bend it low in submission.

With a complete disregard for his own safety, Cơ ardently pursued his lost cause. He was keenly aware that he had no hope of victory, but yet he saw armed resistance as the only righteous course:

We are gathering wind to make a storm as we raise rice and money. We collect trees to set up a forest of sharp sticks and spears. Our determination to engage in mortal combat with our enemies makes us forget our resemblance to a grasshopper kicking an elephant. Victory or defeat depends on one's heart - just as crabs are fearless of what might happen to their castles built of sand.31

On 13 June 1889 he met the same fate as the other heroes.

Not all the resistance leaders in the North were defeatist in their attitudes or completely alienated from the Court. A Tiến Sĩ from Nghệ An, Nguyễn Xuân Ôn32 was convinced that the

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31 For complete poem, see Thợ Văn Yêu Nước, pp. 449-450.
32 For a detailed study of Nguyễn Xuân Ôn's writings and life, see Nguyễn Đức Vấn and Hà Văn Bảo, Thợ Văn Nguyễn Xuân Ôn, Hà Nội, Văn Hóa, 1961.
Vietnamese could achieve a military victory. He argued that they were fighting in their own country and had the advantage of local knowledge. The French, on the contrary, were unaccustomed to the climate of Vietnam and many of their soldiers were mercenaries rather than men who were fighting for their own country. Ông also remained conservative enough in outlook to seek to persuade the Court to change its policy. In two long letters to the Court in 1883, Nguyễn Xuân Ông called for an immediate end to the policy of appeasement and the attempt to use Confucian virtues to win over a completely alien enemy. Of French intentions, he wrote: 'They crossed immense oceans and overcame countless obstacles to steal our lands'. Moreover, he greatly emphasized racial differences between the French and the Vietnamese:

The French enemies are like poisonous bees and angry scorpions, unfriendly wolves and tigers. How can we trust them? Nowadays, to allow these swarms of people, whose religion is quite different from ours, to act freely and also to accept their barbarous civilization in exchange for ours, is altogether ridiculous and useless. Should we do that?

He urged the Court to work to unite the people in armed opposition to the French:

Therefore, while they are violating our country, kill them all, including their consuls, in order to wipe out the danger. Then the Court should try with a pure heart to unite the people and to feed the soldiers generously. It should also gather together all righteous people from its four surrounding areas, from Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An provinces and all the strong people from the North and South. 33

Through these words, Nguyễn Xuân Ông appeared as a typical traditional Vietnamese scholar steeped in conservatism and hatred for foreign intervention of any kind.

33 Thọ Văn Yêu Nâng, pp. 249-250.
Amicable Franco-Vietnamese Relations:
Governor-General of Indo-China and Emperor Khai Dinh
THE CẦN VƯƠNG MOVEMENT

In 1885 the national leadership, which Nguyễn Xuân Ông and his scholar circle had been seeking, appeared in the person of Emperor Hùng Nghi who promulgated the Cần Vương Edict, calling for popular support for armed resistance. Hùng Nghi's Edict gave the scholars new vigour. Not only did they feel that their beliefs and ideas were shared, but also that their assistance was needed. Therefore in various ways they responded warmly to the young Hùng Nghi. Some like Phan Cát Xu,\textsuperscript{34} a Cửu Nhân from Hà Tĩnh, wrote leaflets calling upon people to give ardent assistance to the Emperor. He even called Catholics to serve the righteous cause of Vietnamese nationalism.\textsuperscript{35}

The majority of resistant leaders set up brave but ineffective opposition in their home towns. Everywhere partisans rallied to leaders who, besides fighting, tried to infuse the people with their Confucian interpretation of resistance. People from all walks of life supported the national cause despite the poorly-equipped army and the lack of military experience of the majority of their scholar-leaders.

Over twenty years after the start of French aggression, the Northern and Central scholars still had motivations similar to those of their counterparts in the South. They seemed not at all deterred by their disadvantages and earlier defeats. Their morale was high and they were preoccupied with the thought of carrying on

\textsuperscript{34} Xu even escorted Thuyết and Hùng Nghi into Quảng Trị. Later he set up resistance in his own district. He was fatally wounded in 1886 in an ambush on the French. He, his brother, and a son were all killed in this ambush.

\textsuperscript{35} For the complete leaflet, see Thổ Văn Yêu Naô, pp. 290-291.
the struggle, still believing that 'their spears of humanity and
words of righteousness' would ultimately triumph against French
battleships and cannons.

People should not be thwarted by obstacles,
Everyone should keep his virtue.
We therefore, call upon the country and urge
everybody to employ righteousness to advance
and to employ humaneness to fight. 36

The following are some examples of the different kinds of
motivations and actions of Vietnamese heroes during the Căn Vương
movement and after the capture of Hầm Nghi, which was followed by a
French pacification campaign. They failed to save Vietnam, but were
successful in maintaining the Vietnamese tradition of patriotic
nationalism.

Nguyễn Cao (1828-1887) was a Đại Nguyễn scholar from Bạc Ninh,
who preferred to earn his living by teaching than by entering the
mandarinate. When the French attacked Hà Nội the first time, he
recruited over a thousand partisans to help Phạm Thận in his anti-
French resistance. When Hà Nội was attacked a second time, he became
active again. He received a serious wound in 1883, but after
recovering he joined the Căn Vương movement. Hầm Nghi promoted him
to co-ordinator of resistance in Bạc Ninh, Hưng Yên, and Hải Dương.
He was arrested by the French, refused to turn traitor, and was
sent to Hà Nội prison. In an attempt to commit suicide, he slashed
his belly. The French tried to stop his bleeding to death, but in
vain, as he had already fatally bitten his tongue.

Many of his poems composed during the fighting period were to
praise heroes and to curse and ridicule traitors. But his last
poem, entitled Song of Myself, composed in Hà Nội prison, was the most

36 From the proclamation (1882) written by the Hà Nội scholars
for the Nam Định scholars, Thợ Văn Yêu Nước, p. 421.
beautiful of them. It was his mournful elegy about being doomed to failure from birth:

Lord Creator, why did you bring me into this world.
I failed to render successful service to the King on high.
In the household, I failed to influence the children.
In the society, I failed to unite friends and subordinates.
Contemplating my failure to fulfill the three sacred duties,
I cry abundantly out of my sense of guilt.

Through these words, Nguyễn Cao presented himself as typical of a scholar who was engrossed with Confucian ideals - Từ Thân, Tả Gia, Tri Quốc, and Bình Thiên Họ - and only lived for them. Also he took upon himself a task which was beyond him, and like so many other Confucianists, after his failure he desired death as a way of redemption and escape from circumstances.

...Lord Creator, why did you bring me into this world?
There is no point in living in areas polluted by dogs and goats.
I prefer to die and join the earth and sky.
There is no point in living as a castaway.
I prefer to die and so become a precious fragrant plant in the under-world. 37

Yet despite his failure and the intractability of the situation,
Cao still seemed to have hopes for victory, not through human effort,
but through the intervention of supernatural powers:

Come forth O Sacred Powers from the nine layers of cloud,
Bring storms, thunder, and lightning
To wash away corruption and purify the waters.

The scholar Nguyễn Duy Hiếu (1847-1887) met the same fate of Nguyễn Cao. He was arrested in 1887 but firmly refused all offers of clemancy from the French and the puppet Emperor Đồng Khánh. Finally he was executed. In his poem Inspiration before Execution (Lâm Hính Tĩnh Tác), Hiếu expressed his determination to pursue righteous aims, but he also showed his awareness of the

37 For the whole poem read Thơ Văn Yêu Nước, pp. 204-207. For all his writings, see Phạm Ngọc Hy (ed.), Thơ Văn Nguyễn Cao, Hà Nội, Văn Học.
conflict between spiritual and material ambitions, for righteousness required him to struggle against insurmountable odds:

Very few fir trees can stand upright and firm against the cold.
A single pillar is unable to support a big house.
I can only show my loyal heart to the past emperors.
The mid Autumn moon will follow and shine on me... 38

Nguyễn Quang Bích (1832-1889) was a Tiên Sĩ from Nam Định province, who later became District Chief of Hùng Hóa. There his integrity and compassion earned him the popular title Phát Sông (Living Buddha). When Hùng Hóa citadel fell to the French, he withdrew to the far North where he co-operated closely with the Black Flags. In 1885, Hùng Nghi appointed Bích as co-ordinator of Northern resistance. On behalf of Hùng Nghi, he twice went to Yunnan to seek Chinese military assistance, but because of the Sino-French Treaty of 1885, 39 he was able to achieve little. His collection of poems, entitled Ngữ Phong, 40 speaks of his effort to endure hardship, loneliness, and starvation with his troops when living high in the mountains of Northern Tonkin. In his poem Lacking Ammunition and Food he admitted:

Everywhere enemies extend their hawk-like wings.
Here, our few dozen troops, emaciated through exhaustion, are seeking their daily rations.
Shadows veil the mountain slopes, birds twitter.
Along the valley runs a whispering brook; cold rain and mist descend.

38 Ibid., pp. 298-299.
39 For a Vietnamese text of the treaty see Phan Khoang, Vietnam... pp. 330-333.
40 For a selection of his writings, see Thơ Văn Yên Namocrates, pp. 161-184. For his complete work, Kieu Huu Lý, Thơ Văn Nguyễn Quang Bích, Hà Nội, Văn Hoá, 1961.
What chills me most in this deep retreat is the knowledge that today is my birthday.41

Yet even though they faced great hardships and formidable enemies, Bích still believed they could overcome all obstacles to continuing the struggle:

Everywhere there is silence, not a soul to be found. The soldier far from home feels rather ill at ease. But his heart agrees with his mind, the mountain can be moved. The long hard distance can be endured.42

Thus, despite his poor prospects, Bích continued his guerilla warfare and maintained his robust spirit. When he refused French attempts to buy him off, they put his mother in jail. Part of his reply to French financial offers clearly reflected the Càn Vương ideal:

If you rely on your skills and the good things of your country, we shall keep on with our weakness and our bad things. Then if we can win and stay alive we shall be the righteous soldiers of our country. If unlucky, we shall lose and die, but then we shall surely become supernatural devils for killing enemies. We would rather endure punishment from you than from our Monarch. We would rather be stigmatised temporarily than eternally. Henceforth, please give no more tactless advice... We resolutely agree to die for the sake of righteousness and for the Monarch.43

Here Bích can be regarded as a spokesman for his group, making clear to the enemy their resolution to fulfil their idealistic

41 The author wrote this poem when living in retreat with his soldiers in Sơn Đông, Vĩnh Phúc Province. According to the Vietnamese tradition, birthdays are not celebrated unless one is one year old or fifty years old and over. Birthdays then are occasions for family reunion. This ending line speaks for itself how much Bích missed his family. Thơ Văn Yö Nuơa, p. 175.

42 From the poem Động Thái Bình Sơn (Climbing the Thái Bình mountain). Ibid., p. 167.

43 For the complete letter, see Ibid., pp. 184-185.
responsibility to their Monarch no matter how backward their country seemed.

Finally, a most significant scholar leader of the time was Phan Đình Phùng (1847-1896), a Tiền Sĩ from Hà Tĩnh Province.\footnote{For a biography of Phan Đình Phùng, see Đào Trịnh Nhất, Phan Đình Phùng, Saigon, Tân Việt, 1957. See also David Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism, pp. 61-68.} He was one of the highest ranking officials, after Tôn Thất Thuyết, to participate fully and ardently in the Cần Vương movement, continuing his support even long after the tragic capture of Hãi Nghi. Thanks to Phùng's outstanding talent in maintaining and co-ordinating his forces and to the talents of Cao Thăng, his right-hand man, Phùng's struggle lasted for ten years. Cao Thăng was a youth with a genius for copying French rifles.\footnote{According to Thanh Tông, Ngày Hùng Nước Việt, Saigon, Sông Mỏi, 1973, p. 162 Thăng seized 17 French rifles, copied them and made 400 more.} But in the end Thăng met the same fate as other leading warriors. He was mortally wounded in a fierce battle at the age of twenty-seven. Phùng however, met his death from dysentery.

Phùng was one of the very few people at the time who realised the necessity of modern weapons and a prolonged struggle, marked by guerilla resistance and conceded action. The things people respected most about Phùng were his integrity as a nationalist, his idealism, his deep sense of the mutual responsibility of leaders and followers, his leadership, his endurance of hardship and limitless courage. Indeed he was the very soul of the Cần Vương resistance. His refusal to collaborate, or at least to surrender, proved unshakable despite all enemy tactics. They imprisoned his brother, captured his relatives,...
and worst of all in Vietnamese eyes, desecrated his parents' tombs.

Phùng was reported to have said:

Since I joined with you (his officers) in the Càn Vụơng movement, I decided to forget questions of family and village. Now I have only one tomb, a very large one, that must be protected: the land of Vietnam. I have only one brother, a very important one, who is in danger: a body of over twenty million fellow country men. If I worry about the tombs of my own family, who then will worry about protecting the country's tombs? If I save my brother, who will save the country's brothers? 46

Here, we see that Phùng possessed a modern patriotic attitude, significantly in contrast to the Confucian attitudes of most of the leaders mentioned above. For instance, Hồ Huyền Nghĩa found it painful to choose between sacrifice for the country and family responsibility. Another tradition-bound patron was Phạm Bỉnh (.1887), a Cố Nhâm from Thanh Hóa Province, who worked as Judge of Ngữ An Province. He ardently joined the Càn Vụơng movement by co-operating very closely with Định Công Tráng, a leader of Ba Định resistance (Thanh Hóa), but in the end he surrendered just to gain the release of his mother and his son, Phạm Tieu, who were jailed by the French because of his anti-French activity. However, to reconcile his patriotism and Confucian idealism, he committed suicide immediately after the release.

Overall, each attempt at armed resistance was short-lived, as one after another, the leaders and their followers were arrested and punished. If a resistance leader was lucky enough to be able to maintain his struggle, there existed very little hope of success for him. The shortage of ammunition, provisions, and food were major drawbacks, and matters were made worse by failing morale and the lack of support from the central government. Also, there was no prospect of obtaining outside support from the traditional ally of

46 Đạo Trịnh Nhất, Phạm Đình Phùng, p. 86.
China, since the Sino-French Treaty, signed 11 May 1885, formally recognized France's authority over Vietnam. Yet in this dire situation, Cùn Vông participants continued their struggle. Despite their failure to free Vietnam from French domination, the resistance was significant for its inspiration and its preservation of the patriotic spirit. Even long after their deaths, resistance leaders were honoured and their deeds magnified into heroic episodes. For a Westerner, it is often difficult to understand their seemingly futile self-sacrifice, but to the Vietnamese, their heroic deaths symbolized steadfastness and the desire to follow the time honoured course no matter how remote was the prospect of success.

THE CULT OF HEROES AS OPPOSED TO COLLABORATION AND COWARDICE

The Vietnamese traditional cult of heroes - practiced through the building of shrines, the enactment of plays, and the writing of poems and stories - emphasized only the spirit and high qualities of heroes and disregarded their failures. For instance, Nguyễn Trung Trực was glorified in the following manner for burning a single French ship and killing a dozen Frenchmen:

The red fire on Nhạ Tào illuminated the whole earth and sky.
The movement of his silvery sword reduced the devils and spirits to tears.
The hero stayed firm, his fame lasted for ever,
While those submissive and bending creatures die gradually in shame. 48

What won the resistance leaders praise was not victory in battle

47 This is the so-called Tien-Tsin Convention signed by Ли Hung-chang and Fournier. For the complete text see Taboulet, La Geste..., pp. 825-826.

48 The poem was composed by Huỳnh Mẫn Đạt, District Chief of Hà Tiên. TVYNB, p. 216.
but their attitude of dogged persistence in opposing the French, in spite of the conciliatory stand of the Court. Nguyễn Hữu Huân was praised in the following terms:

In judging a hero, success or defeat is not taken into account. The sky and earth only record his loyalty and right actions. 49

Similarly the scholar gentry from Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh praised Phan Đình Phùng:

For the hero, success or defeat it is not an important matter. All that counts is a loyal heart and a virtuous example. 50

Thus, the Vietnamese traditional cult of heroes preserved through the media of shrines or through literature, was highly idealistic and elevated relatively minor exploits to the level of great deeds, simply on the basis of the 'hero's' motivations rather than his achievements.

The outcome was that we lost, the enemy won, our country became colonized and our people enslaved for over half a century. So, the heroes were certainly not triumphant, bringing victory, unity, and independence back to the country, but they were the ones who were successful in suppressing cowardice, upholding an untarnished attitude, and preserving the honour of the people even when having to face failure. 51

Adherence to the belief that the right course was to oppose the French provoked hatred and harsh criticism for the minority of Vietnamese people who, through collaboration, informing, or traitorous acts, sought to further French aims. Examples of such attacks are found in the writings of Phan Văn Trị and Học Lạc.

Phan Văn Trị (1830–1910) was a native of Gia Định, who, after his own province was occupied by the French in 1861, went to live in Phong Điền village, Cần Thơ Province. Trị is one of the scholars

49 From the anonymous poem Elegy to Nguyễn Hữu Huân, ibid., p. 95.
50 Thọ Văn Yêu Mồ, p. 504.
51 Ibid., p. 18.
who found himself totally unable to accept French rule, regardless of what the French had to offer. He declared: 'my heart is like iron and rock, it will never falter.' This line appears in one of a series of ten poems which people refer to as a literary duel (cuộc but chiến) with Tôn Thọ Thượng, an early collaborator who was most impressed with superior French weapons and accordingly advised his people to submit to French rule. Unlike Thượng, Trì totally disregarded French feats of technology. He also did not hesitate to express his ill-feeling towards collaborators of any kind. He compared them to lice, fleas, ants, and mosquitoes. These were 'blood-sucking animals' who collaborated with the French for material comfort and worst of all, could bring themselves to exploit their own people and crush patriotic forces. Typical of his poems is one entitled Mosquitoes:

You are happy in all respects, yet you still lack something; is that why you are always buzzing? You have dwelt among silken mats, on golden beds, you have kissed painted faces and rosy lips. Your mouths are full, but you give no consideration for innocent children, your stomachs are filled, yet you do not leave the poor people alone. One day we may grasp a wooden stick, and kill you without giving you time to close your eyes. 53

Nguyễn Văn Lạc or Học Lạc (1842-1915) was among the group of Southern scholars who denigrated collaboration. He regarded those Vietnamese officials who were submissive to the French regime as

52 For a detailed biography, read Nhất Tâm, Phan Văn Trí, Saigon, Tân Việt, 1956. For a selection of his poems, see TVYNJB, pp. 94-128. Thơ Văn Yêu Nước, pp. 69-96. For an English translation of five poems drawn from cuộc but chiến, see Trương Bích Lâm, Patterns of Vietnamese response. pp. 82-85.

53 Thơ Văn Yêu Nước, p. 73. TVYNJB, p. 113.

54 For his biography, see Lăng Nhân, Quái Thái Lăng Nho, Saigon, Nam Chí, 1966, pp. 548-556.
lobsters which 'learn to bear feelers and claws' but which actually 'have heads full of impure matter'.\(^{55}\) Meanwhile, those betrayers who had lured resistance leaders into death traps received more acute contempt. An example was made of Huy\^nh Công Tân, who had betrayed Trù\'ng Công Định, and had risen to become a Prefect under French rule. Upon his death, L\'ac described him as the corpse of a drowning dog, drifting down the river, giving off an evil stench, and followed only by groups of small shrimps and circling hawks and falcons.\(^{56}\) This attitude of a compatriot contrasted completely with the esteem in which Tân was held by the French, who gave him the title of 'Chevalier' and finally honoured him with a lavish funeral.

Patriotic writing at the time of the French conquest of Cochinchina also ridiculed the cowardice and conduct of government officials, who sometimes refused to act out their traditional duties. For example, the mandarin Nguyễn Công Nhân, the Province Chief of Mỹ Tho, was disparaged as follows:

There was a strong mandarin, named Nguyễn Công Nhân. Strong but lacking in courage. Upon the arrival of enemies in Bên Tranh, he shook from head to toe. When French boats approached Cửa Tiểu, he ran away as fast as his legs could carry him... Defeated, he thought of suicide to glorify his name.

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\(^{56}\) Poem Chó Chết Trôi (A Drowning Dog), *Ibid.*, p. 552. Học Lạc happened to see Huy\^nh Công Tân's funeral cortege, upon his visit to Saigon. The funeral was celebrated solemnly in the presence of high officials, Vietnamese as well as French. This was what caused Lạc to compose this poem. For an English translation of the whole poem, see David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, p. 38.
Unfortunately, because of his wife and children, how could he do it?57

At the time that the French conquered Tonkin, the Court adopted a conciliatory stand, thereby giving the people an accurate picture of the hopelessness of their national position and the deteriorating morale of government officials in the fact of foreign power. Consequently, patriotic writing from that time on became sharper in tone and reflected some insight into the true nature of the official 'resistance' to the French. Phạm Văn Nghị (1805-1880), a Tiến sĩ from Nam Định Province and an anti-French warrior, gave an account of the first loss of Hà Nội58 in the following terms:

...The province governor, judge, tax collector, and military leaders, all of whom had received generous salaries and bonuses from the Court,59
At the sight of the bald-headed, white-toothed Frenchmen, shock at the knees as though having an epileptic fit.
At the sight of the sharp-nosed and curly haired horde, Their faces turned white as if struck by a thunderbolt. When the citadel gate was shelled by French artillery, They allowed their flags to float away in the wind. They opened the back door for their soldiers to withdraw, And scattered their spears and swords on the ground.

The following is part of the poem composed by Nguyễn Văn Giai after Hà Nội was lost to the French for a second time:

Only a few followed the example of the Governor
(Hoàng Diệu)

57 This is an anonymous poem which made reference to the 1861 French attack on Mỹ Tho (April 1861): one group went inland from Tân An into Ben Tranh, a district of Mỹ Tho, the other group got into Cửa Tiều, a big branch of the Mekong river which run through Mỹ Tho. TVVNNB, p. 218.
58 Taken from the Phú Khải bài rời giọng Pháp đánh lấy Bắc Kỳ (Ode to the loss of Tonkin) Thổ Văn yêu Na đó, pp. 134-135.
59 In traditional Vietnam, the higher the bonuses and ranks you received from the Court in time of peace, the more you were expected to render in return patriotic service during time of war.
The rest, military as well as civil mandarins were impressive in their bemedalled uniforms, but were utterly hollow. During peace-time they took advantage of the people To line their wide-open pockets without any compassion. When troubled times came, their eyes looked puzzled, And their feet dragged on the ground.  

Emperor Tự Đức and his court were also a target for attack because of their vacillating policy. Tự Đức was accused of being a dreamer and a fool because people believed he was engrossed in his poetry, and failed to realise the extent of French ambitions or to notice his people’s suffering at the hands of Chinese pirates who looted and behaved like lords.  

The outcome was confusion, for although the people had three possible governments to turn to - Vietnam, France, and China - they distrusted them all.

The house with three Masters  
Which one should we trust.  

A popular chant entitled Cô Bánh Tây, written by an anonymous composer, can be regarded as the best illustration of the innermost feelings of the people exposed to these pressures and events. The chant was also intended to praise the righteous action of Trần Tấn, in leading an insurrection against both the Court and the French in 1874. Part of the chant reads:

In the year of the dog (1847) Tự Đức mounted the throne,  
Disturbance was everywhere.  
Because of their divided heart  
The Nguyễn asked elephants to trample on their ancestral tombs.  
So the French came to protect.  
The country was divided in three  
They set up administrators,  
Pro-French folks beamed with happiness,  
While those with iron hearts were weighed down with sorrow.

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60 From the poem Hà Thanh Chinh Khi Ca (The Ballad for Hà Nội Citadel), Thơ Văn Tiểu Náo, p. 429.  
61 Poem Complaint on Emperor Tự Đức, ibid., p. 449.  
62 The saying 'Mất nhà ba Chúa biết trong chủ nad'.
The Emperor had only his title
He sat as immobile as a lump of wood.
While the people suffered misery, starvation, and adversity.
One day they were asked to give free labour to Kings and mandarins
The following day they were subjected to the *corvée*.
The land tax was high
So were other taxes.
The Court collected them all
Just to make the French fat.63

Writing in a cynical and ironical tone, the author of the poem expressed
the blame the people felt was deserved by the Court for apparently
doing nothing to oppose French ambitions in Vietnam.

Ten years later, popular literature produced a saying which
even more bitterly denounced the enthroned Emperor for his neglect,
and expressed the people's hatred of collaboration, even when it was
an official policy.

Hàm Nghi is truly a loyal Emperor
Đồng Khánh is obviously an imbecile.64

In 1885, Đồng Khánh was a puppet Emperor, while Hàm Nghi was hiding
in the jungle leading resistance.

CONCLUSION

From the beginning to the end, righteousness prevails,
Foremost at all times is the fulfilment of ruler-subject obligations.
Let us live in honour, let us die in honour.
LIVING OR DEAD, WE SHOULD RESPECT THE FAMILY
AND THE COUNTRY.65

Everywhere in the literature of the time is the emphasis on
righteousness as the principle motive of the Vietnamese resistance

64 Hàm Nghi mới thật Vua trung; Còn nhu Đồng Khánh là ông Vua Xằng.
65 From the poem Hịch Kêu Gợi nghĩa bình dân Tay, TVYNHB, p. 81.
to the French. Yet this is an idealised view for it is clear that
the mainspring of resistance ranged from self-preservation to lofty
idealism. Local loyalties and obligations played an important
part in the resistance as people sought to maintain faith with
their families and ancestors and to ensure their own prestige
with generations to follow. Even the righteousness of the actions
of some of the resistance leaders seems paradoxical, for many
opposed their own Emperor while avowing loyalty to the Monarch.
This contradiction is explained by the Mencius principle of
serving only a competent ruler, but such thinking made unified
action impossible.

Lack of a focus for loyalties, due to disillusionment with the
Court, was one of the most important reasons why the resistance was
so ineffective. Regional loyalties often prevailed over national
ones and resistance forces failed to co-operate. This enabled the
French to concentrate their forces in one or two areas at a time
thereby greatly facilitating the process of conquest. Determined
resistance did trouble the French, but it was on a scale too small
to pose a major obstacle:

It is a difficult and hard-fought struggle which
does not stop even during the stormy heat and the
summer rains. 66

The French were able to further their influence in Vietnam by
making Christian converts and gaining the collaboration of many
officials. In attacking and killing Christian converts the
resistance leaders and their followers alienated their support
and worse still, forced their own compatriots to turn to the
French for protection. The problems of divided loyalties and lack

of co-ordination were compounded by the scarcity of supplies and the technological superiority of the French.

Nevertheless, the resistance had a spiritual significance, which compensated for its military ineffectiveness, by enabling the Vietnamese to maintain self-respect in the face of defeat. The resistance leaders provided an example of patriotism and honour for all Vietnamese, and actively encouraged them to meet any foreign encroachment with extreme intractability. In doing so, they followed directly in the tradition of those leaders who, in the past, had resisted Chinese aggression.

The anti-French and anti-establishment literature which emerged during the time of the Vietnamese struggle against the French expressed the only attitude acceptable to the resistance leaders and the majority of people. Moreover, it tremendously enriched the body of Vietnamese literature and served to make all those involved in the resistance at that time memorable to later generations.
CHAPTER III

NGUYỄN TRƯỌNG TỔ (1828-1871)

A MAN AHEAD OF HIS TIME

One alternative to resistance or a passive-to-French inclusion was the possibility of reform, entailing industrialisation and a replacement of any traditional ways with those of the West. The main proponents of this point of view were Vietnamese Catholic converts who had received western education from missionaries and had furthered their studies overseas. One of the most notable of this group was Nguyễn Trong Tổ. As a private individual, without any official position, yet he took the initiative step for a reformer of petitioning the throne for reforms. He greatly praised Western science and believed that Western learning could overcome the shortcomings of Confucianism, which continued his country and his people. He saw his country was out of stagnation and in need of the challenge of the West, with its superior science. Từ compiled an fourteen memorials which he submitted to the Court in the period 1860-1872. His memorials aroused a wide range of social, economic, industrial, and foreign policy questions and they show that Từ was an outspoken advocate of modernisation.

Unlike the other writers discussed in this study, Từ wrote in verse, his aim being to present arguments rather than to compose literature of artistic merit. To appreciate the epicurean nature of his outlook it is necessary to be aware of the details of his plans for reform - since he presented his memorials at a time when the Court was dominated by conservative views. His writings covered a very broad and very diverse range of subjects and yet were writing with the confidence of one who has a thorough understanding of each topic. This partly reflects his Western education, for he lived at a time when may believe that no educated Vietnamese could acquire a knowledge of most of the sciences. He was an idealist.
One alternative to resistance as a response to French incursion was the possibility of reform, entailing industrialisation, and a replacement of many traditional ways with those of the West. The main proponents of this point of view were Vietnamese Catholic converts who had received Western education from missionaries and had furthered their studies overseas. One of the most notable of this group was Nguyễn Trương Tố. He was a private individual, without any official position, yet he took the unusual step for a commoner of petitioning the throne for reforms. He greatly admired Western science and believed that Western learning could overcome the short-comings of Confucianism, which dominated his country and impeded progress. Earnestly hoping to see his country move out of stagnation and be in a position to face the challenge of the West, with its superior technology, Nguyễn Trương Tố toiled on fourteen memorials which he submitted to the Court in the period 1863-1871. His memorials covered a wide range of social, economic, industrial, and foreign policy questions and they show that Tố was an outspoken advocate of reform.

Unlike the other writers discussed in this study, Tố wrote in prose, his aim being to present arguments rather than to compose literature of artistic merit. To appreciate the modern nature of his outlook, it is necessary to be aware of the details of his plans for reform—all he presented his memorials at a time when the Court was dominated by conservative views. His writings covered a very broad and very diverse range of subjects and yet were written with the confidence of one who has a thorough understanding of each topic. This partly reflects his Western education, for he lived at a time when many believed that an educated Westerner could acquire a knowledge of most of the sciences. He was an idealist,
rather than a practical reformer, who proposed comprehensive changes which were beyond the pale of acceptability to his contemporaries. The Tô's memorials were written in Chinese language and were designated for the Court alone, thus they were not widely circulated at all. Even nowadays, Tô's works are only known by repute to scholars writing in English and French languages. Nor are they readily available in Vietnamese. Consequently there is a dearth of analytical material about his memorials. This chapter aims to show the nature and breadth of the writings of this ardent but unsuccessful proponent of reform.

Nguyễn Trương Tô (1828-1871) was born in Bùi Chu village, Nghệ An province. He followed classical studies from an early age under his father's instruction. At seventeen, he settled in Tân Ấp, a Catholic village. There he continued his traditional studies under the guidance of various Confucian tutors; but far from being influenced by Confucianism, he soon developed instead a great interest in modern science. In 1858, at the invitation of the local Catholic priest, Tô began his career by teaching Chinese to the villagers. While teaching, he became acquainted with Bishop Gauthier (Ngô Gia Hậu), who taught him French and gave him Chinese translations of Western books. In 1860 Gauthier had to leave Vietnam because of the tense situation following the proclamation of strict anti-Catholic regulations. However, he took with him Tô and three Vietnamese missionaries. On the way to France the group visited Hong Kong and Rome. During his stay in Rome, Tô received an audience with Pope Pius IX. Tô spent many years in France studying various subjects, as he mentioned in one of his letters to the Court:

1 They were the brothers Khang, Diên, and Hậu, who later became Catholic priests.
In matters of education I paid attention to all subjects: astronomy, geography, the humanities, codified law and regulations, strategy, religion, natural science, and geometry, all of which I have studied thoroughly.2

Upon his return to Vietnam he witnessed the first loss of territory to France. Because of his knowledge of French, Admiral Charner invited him to work for a short time as an interpreter and translator at the Franco-Vietnamese peace talks in 1862. Subsequently he declined to work for the French and offered his services to the Court, which only granted him a few minor positions.

SELF VINDICATION

Because any who accepted Catholicism and worked for the French could be suspected as a heretic and collaborator, Tô sought to vindicate himself to the Court. His emotional and sincere letter entitled *Self Justification* (*Trần Tịnh Khai*), submitted to the Court after finishing his work as a translator in March 1862, was his attempt to dispel the cloud of doubt and distrust which his personal history might have created, and which the unfavourable outcome of the peace talks might have aggravated:

I tried hard to refuse their offer. But I realised that with the situation as it existed, nothing was better than conciliation. The reason was that we could not compete with them in terms of military forces. Therefore, I agreed in the hope that my service would facilitate the peace talks. If they were successful, I would forego this world to lead the secluded life of a hermit, as I once wrote to my friend, 'After success I shall find an ever-lasting joy'. That was my genuine and only dream.3

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2 The letter, entitled *Trần Tịnh Khai*, was first published in *Nam Phong*, No. 117. It was later translated into Vietnamese and printed in *Văn Hóa Ấ Châu*, III, No. 2 (June, 1960).

3 For the complete letter, see Nguyễn Khắc Nguyễn, Nguyễn Trương Tô, Saigon, 1974, pp. 87-97.
Through these words, Tô provided an explanation of his participation in the peace talks. He worked as a translator solely in the belief that with his service and contribution the peace talks would be successful.

Tô seemed somewhat disturbed at the outcome of the 1862 Treaty which went completely counter to the Court’s will. But his main worry was how to convince people of the existence of his unsubmitive political stand toward the French, of his dignity and virtue, which collaborators lacked. He wrote: 'I stayed with the enemy but I never became their serf.' In another part of his letter he added: 'Even though I worked for the enemy, I never abused the authority vested in me. I kept to the path of virtue.' He cited many examples of the hidden services (giüp ngãm) he performed for the mandarins and his own people:

In the peace draft which both sides passed back and forth through me, I always deleted the rough, improper words which the French used on their draft, or else I softened their words. But if in their draft there were words which were gentle, straight-forward, and in the interests of our country, I translated them very carefully and clearly.

He mentioned that on one occasion he was asked to translate a bundle of Vietnamese documents which the French had captured, saying:

I only chose to translate a few things, irrelevant to our military affairs, or I changed the meaning to confuse the French. In one document there was one section about a scheme to transport weapons and food; I took the document away and replaced it by another one, drafted by me. Then I gave it secretly to the District Chief to pass around...

On the occasion that mandarin Nguyễn (Bá Nghĩ) came to negotiate on behalf of the Court, I was most delighted. Seizing the opportunity of meeting on the boat, I spoke many sentences with a hidden meaning hinting at the scheme (plotted by the French) to cause internal dissension, hoping that the emissary would convey them to the high authorities.

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4 Ibid., p. 89.
5 Ibid., pp. 90-91.
6 Ibid., p. 90.
It appears that the Court did not at all acknowledge the good but hidden service which Tố performed for them. Otherwise he would not have mentioned them in his *Self Justification*. His letter also implies that he felt guilty about working for the enemy even though he did nothing shameful. But the clearest declaration of his earnest, wholehearted desire to render service to the country is found in the conclusion of the letter:

I sincerely hope that your Highness will take my case into consideration, disregard outward appearances, look into my sincere heart, and judge whether I can be of any service to you. I shall present your Majesty with some memorials... which might help the country and the people.  

Even if Tố was cleared of the stigma of collaboration, still he had to face the fact that he was a Catholic. Being a Catholic at that time was a serious matter and a cause for anxiety, given the political situation in which missionaries appeared to pave the way for French conquest. His memorial on *Religious Issues* (Giao Môn Luận) provided clear proof of Tố's sensitivity in this matter, and was his attempt to change the strict rules and harsh punishments applied by the Court to Christian subjects. In the memorial, he gave reasons supporting his beliefs and justifying religious freedom. In particular, he said that religion was a matter of taste, since there were many different people living in the world, but 'as long as they respect the King and Gods' there should be no obligation on people to give up their religion. Also, he argued that there was nothing wrong with having more than one religion in a country; on the contrary, to Tố this was a good and healthy sign:

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8 For the whole memorial, Nguyễn Khắc Ngọc, Nguyễn Trương Tố, pp. 105-112. All the quotations used in this section on Religion are taken from Ngọc's source. The original memorial in Chinese was first published in Nam Phong Tap Chí, No. 118. The translation by Nông Sồn was printed in Văn Hóa & Châu, III, No. 3 (June 1960).
Only prosperous countries have many religions while barbarious countries have only a few. So, just look at the number of religions which exist in a country. Then you may conclude whether that country is powerful and prosperous.

Nguyễn Trọng Tố argued very strongly and convincingly against the Court's accusation that Catholicism was the root of war and disturbance. According to him, the basic teachings of all religions were grounded in good principles including loyalty and filial piety. Religion never created war; it was people who did so. Tố gave evidence that those who followed Confucianism made trouble, too:

From the distant past to the present there have been rebels who followed Confucianism. They neglected the Sage's ethic and made themselves outlaws. So, whose fault was that? Is it all because of their religion, or is it their personalities?

In an effort to convince the Court that anti-Catholic edicts were unjustified and should be rescinded in order to maintain a harmonious atmosphere among the people, he brought to light a number of bad, yet avoidable results of the anti-Catholic measures:

From the time the anti-Catholic edicts were put into practice, people turned in hate and doubt upon each other. Then crime sprang from this hatred. One result was that Christians felt disturbed and lost and embarked on a wrong course.

He felt that, in the matter of religion, people should be allowed to make their own choice. Persecution only creates martyrs who strengthen the faith. He pointed out that countries which were now strongholds of Catholicism had previously witnessed large-scale persecution. He explained this phenomenon in terms of the Christian belief that God supported the weak and oppressed. Therefore, people should be punished only if they committed a criminal offence. They should not be condemned for their religious beliefs.

Tố's statements of his ideas on Christianity and religious freedom indicate the strength of his own religious beliefs. The
points he made to protect his religion, its followers, and himself from ill-treatment seemed logical and had no propagandist intention. His concern for the country was conveyed through his key wish to see Catholics considered as full citizens of the state, thereby eradicating a major source of disunity. However, there existed a seeming paradox in Tô's thinking, for although he was a devout Catholic, he proclaimed devotion to 'King and Gods'. After all, Catholicism advocated only one God to whom full devotion should be given. The paradox may reflect Tô's upbringing, for although he became a Christian convert, he retained respect for his country's traditional beliefs. Nevertheless, Tô's advocacy of religious freedom for Christians must have been unacceptable to the Confucian Nguyễn authorities, because God and the Saviour in Christianity took precedence over the King, country, and ancestors. Rather than placing any God above the King as the arbiter of affairs on earth, Tự Đức - the Son of Heaven - saw himself as the source of judgement and justice in his country. Moreover, Emperor Tự Đức could hardly have accepted the view that one who rebelled against the Court could yet be a proper practitioner of Confucianism. So, it seems that Tô was purposely ignoring the essential Confucian linkage between religion, ethics, and politics which the Court emphasised in their management of the country.

After attempting to prove himself a loyal citizen, Tô embarked upon the career of a patriot seeking improvement of the national condition. He sent his memorials directly to Court, through high ranking officials like Phạm Phú Thủ, Phan Thanh Giản, and Trần Tiến Thành, whom Tô believed would support his case. His memorials can be classified according to specific themes: the conduct of foreign diplomacy, the sending of students
overseas, the hiring of foreign experts and equipment, and the improvement of social, economic, educational, and financial conditions in Vietnam.

REFORMS OF FOREIGN POLICY

Tố believed that French ambitions in Vietnam were centred on securing trade rather than on conquest. Accordingly, he urged the Court to consider Siam as a model, because Siam knew how to conduct friendly relationships and to maintain trade with Western countries. By playing off one Western power against another, Siam could preserve its independence:

Siam does not need to defend its boundaries, yet its interests are respected as if it were a world power. France and England, although interested in taking it, have to leave its land intact. All this is due to its diplomacy.9

Moreover, in his Memorial on Foreign Relations (Điều Trấn Về Việc Giao Thích Vội Quốc Ngoài)5 dated March 1866, Tố criticised the closed-port policy of Vietnam, arguing that it was based on fear of foreigners who were likened to 'wolves' and 'tigers', 'bandits', and 'contagious diseases'. He maintained that the French were mercenary only in the minds of the Vietnamese, and that it would be beneficial to the country to open the ports to trade with Western countries.

An outspoken suggestion, made by Tố, was that the Court should enter into diplomatic relations with the Vatican, so that in the event of emergency, the Pope would intervene to help Vietnam.

9 From the memorial Advantages Accruing from Communication with Foreign Countries (March 1863), see Đặng Quảng Hân, Việt Nam Vở Thông Sách và Thế, Saigon, 1949, p. 337.

10 For the complete memorial, see Phan Khắc Ngữ, Nguyễn Trương Tố, pp. 117-122.
Even though the Pope has no real power in his hands, all countries admire his judgement. So if he thinks help is necessary, all countries will help us.

Also, he believed that Vietnam could be protected by exploiting Western rivalries, and Tô advocated this view in his memorial Six Advantages (Lực Lợi Tự).\textsuperscript{11}

He had a very Westernised approach to diplomacy and the same thinking guided his attitude towards China. He strongly opposed the tribute system by which relations between Vietnam and China had traditionally been conducted and which the Court appeared to be applying in its dealings with Western countries. He wanted Vietnam to change its diplomatic practice to the Western manner and to adopt Western ways, not only in relation to the staffing of diplomatic missions, but also in relation to such matters as personal hygiene and the wearing of footwear. He considered these changes would save Vietnam from ridicule by Western countries.

I request that you be prepared to adopt other nations' customs so as to avoid their irritation and to safeguard your national pride....

If they laugh, that does not mean they are laughing at one individual but at the whole country. If they laugh at the whole mission, that is especially shameful for the country.\textsuperscript{12}

On the question of repelling invaders from Vietnam, Tô proposed a policy of submission to be followed later by a renewal of hostilities after Vietnamese men had become skilled in Western methods of warfare:

\textsuperscript{11} For the complete memorial see Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ, Nguyễn Trường Tộ, pp. 99-103.

\textsuperscript{12} From Memorial On the Subject of Sending Mission Overseas (Về Việc Thi Sĩ) dated March 1863. This memorial gives details on how Vietnamese missions to France should behave, who should be selected to go, and how they should dress. See Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ, Nguyễn Trường Tộ, pp. 113-116. The Chinese text in Nam Phong, No. 120 (August 1927).
If we do not know how to adjust ourselves to new circumstances, if we refuse to yield a portion of our land to preserve our integrity, and if, by misfortune, our forces are all destroyed, we shall lose the entire country. Therefore, our best policy, for the time being, is to cease hostilities and to place under French suzerainty a portion of our frontier land. Once the area is occupied by a strong tiger, it will no longer be disturbed by foxes. Then, while the population is enjoying the subsequent peace, we shall send our brilliant children overseas to study the techniques of attack and defense of powerful countries and also to learn the skills of other people. During their long sojourn abroad, our students will certainly understand all aspects of the foreign situation. If they study well, they will become skilled, and once skilled, they can help to strengthen our country upon their return. We may then accumulate strength and put our new skills into action when the time comes. In this way, it will not be too late to regain in the evening what we lost in the morning.  

The most important point in this passage was that Tô only suggested this peaceful approach as a short-term measure - to allow the Court to carry out drastic reforms which would later enable Vietnam to assert its independence. His peaceful policy reflects his assessment that superior French weapons and military tactics were at the time invincible.

In 1867, the French occupied the remaining provinces of Conchinchina. The incident probably inspired Tô to write his memorial Eight Reforms which Need to be Carried Out Urgently (Tô Cấp Bát Điều). This was his most eloquent work and drew on all his knowledge - including ideas acquired from overseas - to provide his government with well-laid plans for reform, which would strengthen Vietnam in its relations with other countries. The memorial also indicates Tô’s ardent longing to see Emperor Tự Đức and his mandarins change their attitude towards the West, to awaken...
from their long sleep and realise that changes in the Western world posed a threat.

Years ago, the British took possession of India and Foo-chow. Now the French are going to follow their precedent. For the past six or seven years I have watched (French) activities. Before they actually had a solid foothold in our land, they were already able to conquer six provinces. They did that in no time. In ten years' time, with more concentration and preparation, how far do you suppose they will go?¹⁵

The drastic reforms Tố advocated in this memorial summarised ideas contained in other works and included proposals for modernising the educational system, improving military equipment and tactics, increasing agricultural productivity, and fostering general economic development.

REFORMS OF EDUCATION

Tố wished to bring Vietnamese education up to date with Western education, emphasising practicabilities, scientific methods, and technological advancement. Tố argued that the Nguyễn Court should revitalise the whole system of education to make it more useful. He severely criticised the traditional Vietnamese system of learning and those who slavishly clung to it. He suggested that:

Instead of exerting all effort and labour to polish their calligraphy, they should devote themselves to the study of current affairs, strategy, building fortresses, and casting cannon. In this way alone could they be able to resist the enemy.

Instead of spending over half of one's lifetime memorising all things appertaining to past dynasties such as Yin, Hsia, Shang, Chou T'ang, Sung, and Yuan, all their heroes, their historical places and their books on ethics, they should learn how to improve present matters such as welfare, finance, architecture, agriculture, and domestic industry, and introduce new methods. In this way they gradually strengthen the country and enrich the people.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 41.
¹⁶ Ibid., p. 61.
Furthermore, instead of toiling uselessly on eight-legged essays, flowery words in praise of the moon, wind, and clouds, Tô believed the Vietnamese authorities should give their attention to things which were more practical and relevant to Vietnam.

Our country is poor, why don't we find a means to enrich it? Our army is weak, why don't we find a way to strengthen it? Our people are dishonest, why don't we find a way to make them honest? The common people are wretched, why don't we show them ways to overcome their misery? The foreign enemy has planned to enslave us, and steal our property, why don't we come together and formulate plans for defense?¹⁷

In a very scornful manner, Tô added that, if the Court was unafraid of the encroachment of the enemy, which was already surrounding Vietnam from all directions and was about to enforce its rule, it should continue to rely on customary worship of the past and the literature of China. However, in an effort to make the authorities understand the utter uselessness of such traditional study in view of the dangers facing Vietnam, Tô stated: 'When one is hungry, one cannot cook poems to appease hunger.'¹⁸

Tô suggested a number of major educational reforms including sending Vietnamese students overseas for training and inviting Western experts to Vietnam. Tô advocated such innovations because he was convinced that Vietnam's deep attachment to the Confucian cultural tradition was a great obstacle to reform, pointing out that his country should follow the lead which China and Japan were giving in seeking to learn from the West. He noted that Japan had sent a prince as well as others to Paris to take up Western studies and that China also sent her envoy to Paris to purchase machinery and to invite French scholars to Peking to teach science. Seemingly, Tô

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 64.
¹⁸ Ibid., p. 64.
wished to have Emperor Tông Đức emulate the Emperor of China, as he pointed out that the latter was changing his attitudes and was making efforts to modernise and introduce Western technology:

From the past up to the present time, the haughty Easterners have always thought that they have everything, and therefore regard other people in the world as barbarians. To them, China is best. But now the Chinese disregard what has been said about them and try to change their ways.19

However, Tông appeared to ignore that these changes in China - the Tung Chi Restoration - had been accompanied by a Confucian revival, rather than by a dwindling of interest in Confucianism.

To reform the educational system, Nguyễn Trương Tông urged that the government should stop selecting people as officials simply on the basis of competitive literary examinations and encourage diversification into many fields of study. He urged the establishment of institutions for the study of new subjects such as astronomy, geography, natural science, and agriculture. Their purpose was not only to train students, but also to conduct research, entailing the translation of source materials, revision of outdated works, and the production of new books.20 In his promotion of astronomy and geography, Tông was rejecting the concept of the inter-correlation between Heaven and Humanity (Thuyết Thiên Nhân tương cảm). Moreover, deliberately or not, Tông rejected the Confucian tradition which emphasised moral and intellectual attainments as prerequisites for a well-ordered society. Instead, he suggested the introduction of a codified system of law in which both mandarins and commoners were to be instructed. Tông argued strongly against the current view which claimed that the study of codified law would not bring popular virtue:

19 Ibid., p. 43.
20 Ibid., p. 62.
[I wonder] whether these people know that all deeds contrary to law are vices and all deeds in accordance with law are virtues.... If the administrators conduct justice and act only in accordance with what is prescribed in the law book, their powers would be considered as virtue. Can law, therefore, be considered as true virtue.21

As a final proposal on the reform of education, Tô urged the establishment and use of the National Language (Quoc Âm) within Vietnam, rather than Chinese. Tô considered the lack of a national language in Vietnam 'a great misfortune' brought upon Vietnam by the Vietnamese themselves. He claimed:

Our people adore the use of foreign script (Chinese) so unquestioningly that even our talented and clever people dare not invent a new system for fear of public criticism.22

However, Tô's chief argument against the use of Chinese was that its complexity restricted its use to the upper and official classes. As he pointed out, Vietnamese commoners who had not learnt Chinese, would take it 'as titters of birds or cawing of crows'23 when it was read to them, unless they were provided with interpreters. The same situation did not exist in European countries because even illiterates could understand their national language when it was read to them. Tô used this evidence to support his promotion of the use of Quoc Âm:

With regard to European children, after three years of studying their national language, they can understand all the words. This is quite different from those who learn Chinese. Even though they study until they die, still they can command only one third of the language.24

He provided the statistical evidence that Chinese has forty thousand

21 Ibid., pp. 63-64.
22 Ibid., p. 64.
23 Ibid., p. 65.
24 Ibid., p. 65.
characters, and that the best scholar of the language used only a quarter of them.  

For these reasons, Tô proposed

> If Chinese characters are read according to the pronunciation of the national spoken language, everybody will understand. Will it not be less complicated and troublesome?

Thus Tô suggested not an abolition of Chinese, but rather its use as the basis of a new Vietnamese script.

To promote mass education and interest people in the activities of the Government, Tô suggested that the Court should publish a newspaper mentioning all edicts, decrees, and achievements of the Government. The newspaper was to be in Quoc Âm so that the people would be kept informed about matters concerning their country.

Nguyễn Triệu Tô's plan for educational reform can be viewed as a reflection of his belief that if people followed traditional studies, they would only look to the past and would preserve its old-fashioned ways, without any desire for change. Followers of modern studies, on the other hand, would look to the present and so try to build a successful future. Yet Tô did not urge an unqualified adoption of Western methods in education. Most notably, he did not attempt to make a case for the use of Quoc Ngữ, which the French were introducing in Cochin China, their conquered land, nor did Tô argue for the complete replacement of the traditional moral code with Western law.

MILITARY REFORMS

Military reforms had occupied a place in almost all memorials which Tô submitted to the throne from 1861 to 1871. However, none of the reforms he proposed were instituted. In 1871, he formally

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27 In his memorial *Eight Reforms which Need to be Carried Out Urgently*, Tô placed military reform as his first request.
brought the Court's attention once again to the urgent need to build a powerful army along Western lines. The main reason for regarding this task as important was to enable Vietnam to keep pace with the newest developments in the military technology and military strategy of the Western world which, Tô saw, had been transformed like 'a cicada going through a complete metamorphosis.'

Tô's plans for military reform proposed that the government should discard all outmoded weapons, old books, and war tactics worked out in the distant past. Instead, the Court should appoint a group of experts of great military talent to compile information and decide which techniques would be most suitable for Vietnam. These men should also select foreign books about land and sea warfare and have them translated and thoroughly examined. Tô made a point of criticising the usual tendency of Vietnamese officers to carry out literary research without testing their conclusions in practice. Also, he suggested the establishment of military schools, where able-bodied men should be admitted as cadets to receive three-year military training and education from foreign experts as well as Vietnamese officers. Upon graduation, they would continue military drill even if their service was not needed. Tô indicated his disappointment and disapproval of the lack of regular training in the Vietnamese army and criticised the improper use of Vietnamese soldiers: They were only summoned to give their service when the country was in danger, the rest of their time was being spent working either as attendants or slaves to the mandarins and officers as labourers on public works. Most important, he called for

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28 Memorial on Military Reform (June 1871). See Văn Dân 3, No. 35 (July 1962).
improvements in the living conditions and treatment of Vietnamese military men and held up the model of French soldiers and the generous treatment they received from their government and commanders:

If they are wounded or sick, they have a pleasant and beautiful place to stay. For example, in the military headquarters in Paris stands a large, modern hospital, which is the tallest building.... There are also good houses for enlisted soldiers. Houses are built in different styles, as are the residences of officers. All have beautiful gardens for entertainment. In European countries, in every citadel there are gardens of this kind. The soldiers eat and drink well, and are fed until old age.... Moreover, their salary is sufficient to support their family.29

What Tố admired most was the relationship between officers and men in Western countries. This, he claimed, from his own observation, was a kind of relationship based on respect and sharing. He made clear the contrast between the life-style of the military in Europe and in Vietnam in his statement:

Vietnamese soldiers are not adequately fed in time of peace but are expected to disregard danger in time of war. They are treated like slaves but are expected to sacrifice themselves in time of danger.... Meanwhile, the veterans are treated like old horses or aging buffaloes.30

In Tố's opinion, existing conditions would discourage people from joining the army, and therefore should be changed.

In the belief that there were too many soldiers in the Vietnamese army, Tố reminded the government that 'they are judged according to quality, not quantity.'31 Tố suggested restrictions on recruitment but improvements in conditions and training for those selected. Thereby, the morale of the soldiers would be raised and they would serve the country more effectively when they were needed.

Turning his attention to the selection and training of officers,

29 From Eight Reforms..., Văn an 1973, p. 47.
30 Ibid., p. 48.
31 Ibid., p. 48.
Tô suggested that educated men (Tô Tài and Cử Nhạn) be chosen to undergo three years of training. His reason was that troop commanders should have at least some fundamental education so as to be able to study military books and further develop their minds. Tô also considered the quality of leadership and conduct of officers as important and worthy of notice. 'However good soldiers might be, under the control of incompetent leaders, they could hardly secure victory.'\(^{32}\) Therefore, he suggested that the Court should carefully select officers and then grant them a generous system of rewards and allowances, to encourage proper behaviour and effective service.

The most important recommendation in Tô's plan for self-defense was the improvement and strengthening of fortresses, stocks of weapons, and coastal defenses. He reasoned that it was necessary that military men have education, but it was vital to them to have adequate, up-to-date weapons to protect themselves. 'If bare hands are used against fierce tigers, if victory is secured it is all luck.'\(^{33}\) Also, he rejected bitterly the belief that a word of righteousness was more powerful than a thousand soldiers. Tô advocated the buying of machinery for the manufacture of simple weapons and the purchase of weapons which were too complicated to be manufactured in Vietnam. There should be foreign experts at Vietnamese arsenals to give guidance. This arrangement would have the double advantage of immediate production of weapons at home and the creation in five or six years time of a body of locally trained technicians. Tô also asked for strict control of these arsenals and secret testing of their products.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 48.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 50.
Believing defense should be conducted even in time of peace, Tô urged that at all strategic points, like mouths of rivers and along the borders, artillerymen should be placed on alert day and night, lest war should break out. Cavalry should be introduced into the Vietnamese army to provide quick and reliable transport of mobile attacking forces. Four hundred to five hundred horses should be purchased from Manila and experienced Filipino horse trainers should be hired to drill Vietnamese boys. The Vietnamese army should also establish telegraphic communications.

To meet the expense of building a modern army, Tô suggested the borrowing of money from prominent European businessmen residing in Hong Kong. In return, they should be granted commercial privileges at some ports. Meanwhile, within the country, appeals should be made to the people to support the army. Tô's most outspoken idea was that the Nguyễn Court should stop expenditure on the hire of Manchu's soldiers. Instead, it should spend the revenue on Vietnamese troops. Vietnamese soldiers, in his opinion, would be as good as the Manchus if the government treated them well and made proper use of their services.34

Tô's proposals for military reform were thus fairly comprehensive and very far reaching, as they envisaged a complete re-organization of Vietnamese military forces with little regard to traditional practices. He believed such reforms were of great importance in maintaining Vietnam's security - a belief which is evidenced in the volume and detail of his writings on this subject.

34 Memorial Military Reforms, Phan Khắc Ngữ, Nguyễn Trương Tô, p. 143.
ECONOMIC REFORM

Just as Tô's views on military reform were many years ahead of his time, so too were his ideas on economic development in Vietnam - to change the country from a traditional agrarian society to an industrialising one.

The question of how to make the country rich and the people strong was a prime issue which Tô considered in many of his memorials. He wrote in his memorial *Six Advantages*: 'If money is introduced, food will be sufficient, modern fortresses strong, warehouses full. Advantages will increase while disadvantages decrease.' In his memorial *Proposition For Educational Reforms*, he wrote:

> The ancients once said: It is necessary to secure survival first, then encourage proper behaviour. It is necessary to have clothes to wear and food to eat first, then afterwards to think of glory and shame. If poverty keeps following someone, how can he react with loyalty and piety.

In *Eight Reforms Need To Be Carried Out Urgently*, Tô noted: "The ancients stated" if people have no food to eat, no clothes to wear, they will abandon their loyalty to the King. Here, Tô was probably following a middle course, involving a mixture of conservatism and progressiveness. On the one hand, he emphasised loyalty and filial piety while, on the other hand, he stressed the need to safeguard the well-being of the people. Both were necessary to ensure the creation of a strong state and the promotion of the welfare of the people.

Consequently, Tô stressed the need to make the country rich through self-help and the exploitation of national resources, and certainly not through tax collection.

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37 Văn lâm 1975, p. 61.
What I think can help to increase the national budget is certainly not the extortion of people's money to make the taxman rich, but the exploitation of national resources to increase revenue.\textsuperscript{38}

His plan for self-help involved the wholesale adoption of modern measures to improve the existing agricultural, industrial, commercial, and financial systems of the country.

1. Agriculture Development

Since agriculture provided the major part of people's livelihood in Vietnam, Tô strongly suggested its development. In particular, there should be a Ministry of Agriculture in the central capital, as in Western countries, to train agricultural officials and to issue a condensed but detailed book called \textit{The Complete Book on Agriculture} (Nông Chính Toàn Thassel). This book, the product of many experts in the field, would contain various selective agricultural methods applicable to different types of soils, for the cultivation of crops and the raising of cattle. Copies of this book would be distributed to every village, and agricultural officials would go to the villages to give the peasants instruction on the new agricultural methods. Most anxious to see the farmers abandon ancient methods of cultivation, which hindered them from obtaining high yields, Tô urged the Nguyễn Court to reward those who were successful in finding new and more effective methods of cultivation. In Tô's view, such measure was necessary to the task of improving agriculture in Vietnam. Tô even proposed that:

If the Court wants to experiment with my agricultural proposals, a trial scheme should first be carried out.

in one province for a period of four to five years. If it yields good results, the reform should be adopted on a nation-wide scale. Otherwise, the whole plan should be abandoned. It will not be too late.\footnote{Nguyễn Khắc Ngãi, Nguyễn Trọng T옇, p. 159.}

T옇 was so confident of the good results of his project that he wished to be employed as one of the agricultural officials:

If I am allowed to work with the officials and try out my project within a province, and if nothing good comes of it, I shall certainly accept the blame.\footnote{Ibid., p. 159.}

To increase yields and the quantity of land, he proposed the reclamation of wasteland and the creation of new hamlets. He advised the Court to follow the example of Emperor Lê Thái T옇 (Lê Lợi), by encouraging people to till virgin land and only taxing them after the land had been brought under cultivation. In remote places lacking irrigation, where labour was scarce, T옇 proposed the employment of outlaws, outcasts, and prisoners, and their families for the development work. T옇 saw the huge potential of developing wasteland, through this kind of organisation. Also, he saw the need to develop irrigation and flood control systems to reduce the impact of natural disasters so that the people could concentrate their efforts on producing high yields from the land.

In his memorial on The National Economy, T옇 suggested the preservation of forests, stressing their good effect on the local climate and help against floods. He said:

I am very sad to see all forests within my district completely felled and destroyed by foolish people, who sometimes even set fire to the vegetation of the mountain. They destroy the forests because they do not know what good use might be made of them in oxygenating the air.\footnote{Ibid., p. 153.}
He also proposed the cultivation of orchards and plantations and the production of timber for building.

2. Industrial and Commercial Development

Although Tô recognised the need to improve agricultural productivity, he saw the development of industry as being vital to the country’s enrichment. Industrialisation had not advanced beyond the handicraft level, and Tô argued that manufacturing must be brought up to more modern standards. He advocated that technical colleges, factories, shipyards, and cannon foundries be set up, with the help of foreign experts and investors, and that talented Vietnamese be sent abroad to learn Western mechanical expertise. In particular, he believed that the government should encourage the people to invest in industry as opposed to their traditional custom of investing in land. Also, Tô wanted to end the discrimination against industry and commerce – any profession which rendered good service to the state should be assisted and rewarded.42

Greatly interested in minerals himself and knowing their limitless resources, Tô ardently called on his government to seek co-operation and support from Western companies for the development of mines in Central Vietnam. Recommendation was also made for the expansion of trade through the improvement of communications and transportation. He suggested the establishment of a long canal, parallel to the coastline, from Hải Dương to Thuận Hóa to provide safe passage for small boats, and the purchase of steamboats for international trade. He gave detailed instructions regarding which

42 Memorial on Educational Reform, Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ, Nguyễn Trường Tộ, pp. 170-171.
Western country produced the most efficient boats.

But we have to send our men, skilled in engineering, to make the selection; it will be disastrous if we only listen to the vendors. I feel that, at the moment, in our country there are some people with a knowledge of machinery, steam power, and tool preparation, though I must consider myself most qualified. 43

In the final sentence, T&virtually said that he wished to serve the Court as a buyer of foreign boats.

T& also proposed the export of Vietnamese goods to foreign countries. For instance, he wrote:

Our copper and nickel is worth only one French dollar in Vietnam, but if sold in France it would fetch eight dollars.... Our silk, thread, fish, and salt would bring similar profits. 44

He even suggested the purchase of Yunnanese silk and its resale to Western countries at a profit.

3. Taxation Adjustment

Nguy&n Tr&ng T& supported a system of high import levies to protect and promote local enterprise, a tax on luxury items such as liquor, cigarettes, opium, and the licensing of brothels:

In Europe, imported goods are taxed twice as highly as local goods. The luxury items, unnecessary for the maintenance of human life, are taxed even more highly. 45

T& criticised the advantages granted to foreign goods over native products, and even the habit of the upper classes of drinking Chinese tea. Since Vietnamese tea was just as good and refreshing, a high tax should be placed on Chinese tea to encourage people to drink Vietnamese tea and stop the loss of money to Chinese merchants.

T& seemed to be in favour of high taxation of the rich. His

43 & 44 Memorial The Purchase of Steamboats, see Nguyên Lân, Nguyên Tr&ng T&, p. 74.

45 Memorial Eight Reforms..., V&m Đ&m 1973, p. 56.
argument was the moral one that millionaires, selfish and complacent towards the poor and yet extravagant in gambling dens and pleasure houses, were 'human beings, but of iron and with bestial hearts'\textsuperscript{46}

If [the rich] want to maintain and increase their wealth, they should have to contribute to the government for the purchase of weapons, which in turn can help to protect their wealth. For such reasons in Europe, the government taxes the rich highly. It is only just to do so.\textsuperscript{47}

In addition to high taxes for the rich, Nguyễn Trọng Tô suggested the reorganisation of other Vietnamese taxes, especially the poll tax and the land tax. His intention was to have a more just tax system. He wrote: 'My request is not to levy more on people, but to help balance the burden between rich and poor.'\textsuperscript{48} Of He frankly disapproved the way tax was levied equally and regularly on every head. He proposed that land tax should be levied on the basis of the land's fertility and productivity rather than on its area.

In order to enforce the collection of tax, the government should conduct a complete census of population similar to those which existed in Western countries, and the work of compiling the census should be undertaken annually by local officials and even by village chiefs. Tô reasoned that:

I regard the relationship between the government and the people as comparable to that existing between parents and children.... If parents do not know the number of their children, their occupations, their financial situation, who die and who live, who are miserable, who are good, they do not fulfil their duties as parents.... Now if the government does not know the number of its male and female citizens, the old, the young, the rich, the poor, and their occupations, then it surely neglects its duties.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{46} & \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., pp. 55-57.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. 58.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 74.
To ease the social problems arising from crime, delinquency and unemployment, Tô proposed that people who were a burden to the state be resettled in remote areas and employed in development work. Tô also recommended the establishment of orphanages, which he believed the missionaries were best suited to run. He even believed that only Western nuns could bring up the children effectively and proposed that each province should have an orphanage under the direction of a bishop. Meanwhile, the nuns should:

Act as mothers to the children, feed them, and teach them. They love the orphans as their own children,... Only those Western women, who decide to keep their chastity and so remain unmarried, can bear the filth and mess.\(^{50}\)

He proposed that money to maintain orphanages be donated in part by the children of wealthy Vietnamese, as was the custom in Europe.\(^{51}\)

Nguyễn Trương Tô thought that his government should adopt the same charitable measures that he so admired in Western countries. He wrote:

Rich [Westerners] establish free centres for children, travellers, unmarried mothers, the aged, infants, the sick, and the crippled. These kinds of organisations can be found everywhere. They do so, not only out of charity, but in imitation of the good example set by the government.\(^{52}\)

He proposed collections of money as in Western countries to provide funds for social welfare activities.

Side by side with welfare works, the government should pay attention to the embellishment of cities and towns. He wrote: 'I beg you to encourage wealthy people to invest their money by building brick houses for rent and demolishing all thatched dwellings outside and inside the citadel'.\(^{53}\) The replacement of thatched houses by

\(^{50}\) \& \(^{51}\) Ibid., p. 83.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., pp. 81-82.

\(^{53}\) Memorial on Educational Reform, Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ, Nguyễn Trương Tô, p. 173.
those built of brick would improve the appearance of the city, raise the morale of its inhabitants, particularly the soldiers, and contribute to public health and safety. The Court should take the lead in cleaning the city and planting trees, so that 'people may breathe fresh air and lead a healthy life.'

GOVERNMENT REFORM

Tô's proposals for government reform were based on three idealistic concepts. First, the government's actions should be in accordance with the people's will. Second, there should be harmonious relations between the government and the people. Third, power should reside with the Monarch. Thus, there appears to be a paradox in his political thinking, for although he advocated the maintenance of the monarchy and all its powers, at the same time he wanted the Monarch's decisions to be a reflection of the will of the general populace. Yet, rather than viewing the Monarch's power as absolute, he believed the Monarchy should fulfil a paternal role, safeguarding the best interests of the people. Idealistically, this was the traditional role of the Monarch in Vietnam, but it was a role unfulfilled in reality. Tô brought out important facets of contemporary Vietnamese society:

Inside the Court, the mandarins flatter the Emperor just to please him, cover up all unpleasantness, baulk the progress of talented people, and even divide into factions against each other. Outside, the corrupt officials and greedy landlords use their authority to oppress the weak.

However, Tô thought the low pay of the mandarins was the root of their corruption.

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54 Memorial on Eight Reforms... , Văn Đản 1973, p. 79.
55 Memorial on People Under Heaven, Nguyễn Lân, Nguyễn Trung Tô, p. 114.
The salary of one district chief is worth only three to four ạng, insufficient for even one person, so how can he support his whole family? Having not enough to eat and spend, and yet having to obey royal precepts, he is led to corruption. 56

Thus Tô suggested a reduction in the number of provinces and officials, and an increase in salaries.

Revise the provincial boundaries, group two to three provinces into one, two to three districts into one, then increase the salary of mandarins and officials by dividing between them the extra funds available. 57

The officials, in return, had to bear in mind the tasks required of them:

Officials should be conscientious, they should travel far and wide into villages to investigate the people's troubles. Most important, they have to be informal, for instance, they should not reveal their movements and so save the people the trouble of waiting and welcoming them. 58

These lines reflect Tô's concern for the common people and his criticism of the arrogance of the mandarin class and of the elaborate traditional custom of entertaining and welcoming representatives of the Court, which wasted the people's time and money. In the belief that the will of the people should be taken into account even by the Court, Tô suggested the co-operation of the people in the shaping of national policy in economic and social matters:

I beg the Court to present its problems and new policies in public and to circulate them widely among the people, regardless of their religion. Anyone who understands the matters in question should be allowed to write down his suggestions in a booklet. Once a month, the provincial officials should collect these and send them to the Court. Any booklet which contains valuable and practical ideas should be highly prized and its author rewarded. 59

57 Ibid., p. 52.
58 Ibid., p. 51.
Tô was not the only individual to memorialise the throne. Proposals for reform poured into the Court from the more far-sighted officials. Phạm Phú Thủ, the Deputy Ambassador to France and Spain, upon his return home in 1863, urged the establishment of a naval school, a language school, the purchase of ammunition, and freer contacts with foreign powers. Nguyễn Huy Tô and Trần Đình Túc, who had been sent to Hong Kong in 1868, proposed the opening of several seaports for international trade. Nguyễn Hiếp, after his mission to Thailand in 1879, recommended the tactic of playing off one Western power against another, and the expansion of international trade on the basis of strict equality without Western duress. Đình Văn Bieten proposed the building of ships, locomotives and the exploitation of the country's mineral resources. However, as Trần Văn Giàu remarked:

The memorial of Nguyễn Trường Tô were the most outstanding of all the memorials sent to the King from the first arrival of the French to the time they occupied the whole country. 60

Tô surpassed his contemporaries in the breadth of his vision, making detailed recommendation on a wide range of questions, economic, social, political, and military. Although some of his memorials covered the same subject matter and expressed the same views as found in the writings of Li Hung-Chang and Tseng Kuo-fan, which were presented to the Ch'ing Court during the 1860's, Tô must still be regarded as the most visionary proponent of reform. His ardent call to the Court and people to break away from their deep cultural attachment to China and pursue

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60 Trần Văn Giàu, Sử Phát Triển..., p. 381.
reforms along Western lines was well meant to ensure the survival of Vietnam.

Tô stood in sharp contrast to his archly conservative generation. Clearly, Tô derived most of his ideas from books, Western learning, contact with missionaries, and from experiences while living overseas. Most of his proposals strongly reflect his admiration of the West. For instance, Tô wanted to see in Vietnam charitable institutions, beautiful gardens, clean streets, and brick houses such as he had seen in Rome and Paris. Nevertheless, one cannot say that Tô was completely Westernised, for there remained traces of his traditional learning. He wanted all his reforms to be carried out within the framework of an unchanged monarchy, the ultimate goal being to restore national harmony. In all his memorials Tô carefully evaluated the purpose of modernisation. He did not want simply to duplicate the example of Western Society in a Vietnamese environment. He seemed anxious to retain the orderly monarchic society of Vietnam. Yet, Tô failed to see how some of his reforms, such as the encouragement of commerce and entrepreneurial activity, would inevitably weaken the monarchy. Furthermore, his idealism was based partly on Confucianism, as is shown by his belief that government is subject to moral sanctions. Also, he believed that if a country was properly administered and strongly defended, no other country would invade it.

There is evidence that Emperor Tôictionary, despite his conservatism, was impressed with Tô's memorials. He asked the Minister for Defense, Trần Tiến Thành, to make a report on the author and to invite him to Huế. Indeed, in 1866 Tô received warm treatment at the Imperial capital. Even though he left Huế without notice, he was forgiven when
later he returned with Father Gauthier. Tự Đức, who intended to set up a Vietnamese technical school, sent them both to France to invite French experts and teachers to Vietnam. The loss of Cochinchina in 1867 interrupted their mission and Tự Đức, who subsequently doubted French good will, ended the programme of hiring foreigners. When popular anti-Catholic feeling was at its highest, following the loss of three Western Provinces in 1867, Tự Đức ordered Thánh to protect Tố by providing him with a safe conduct pass back to his Catholic town. In 1870, Tự Đức again summoned Tố to Court to be employed as an escort for some Vietnamese students going abroad for training.

Such actions indicated Tự Đức’s agreement in principle with many of Tố’s ideas. Nevertheless, in actual fact most of Tố’s advice was ignored. Part of the explanation was that Tự Đức, beset by illness, and preoccupied with the cares of state, passed for viewing all his memorials to his Court officials, who made no clear criticism, but simply put them aside. So the Court officials were to some extent responsible for not having Tố’s reforms carried out. The attitude of the councillors can be explained by the fact that their minds and hearts were too closed to welcome any new ideas, as they feared this would have heralded an end to their traditional status and customs. Furthermore, the Court officials were not prepared to be told what to do by a commoner, who was also a convert to Catholicism. Chuồng Thấu put the blame squarely on the Nguyễn authorities for not carrying out Tố’s reforms:

The prime reason for the failure of these programmes of reform lay in the reactionary attitude of the Nguyễn authorities, for the content and plan of the reforms

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were applicable to a monarchical regime.\textsuperscript{62}

Meanwhile, Văn Tấn stated: 'the call of Nguyễn Trưởng Tố became like a voice crying in the wilderness.'\textsuperscript{63}

Both remarks are sound, in view of the authorities' conservatism. But we should also stress the extent to which Tố's plans were too costly, too generalised, and over ambitious. Vietnam at the time of French conquest was at low ebb, and neither the economy nor the state finances were in a strong position. Moreover, Tố's plans were long-term but the court was committed to short-term policies. The most serious and immediate issue confronting the Court was the French conquest; French aggression had filled the authorities with doubt and distrust of the French, yet Tố innocently believed France would leave Vietnam in peace to carry out reform and might even render assistance.

Tố himself was fortunate in his contacts with French nationals, most of which were made through Father Gauthier. He was also a genuine, if somewhat naive, Christian who saw the missionaries as only seeking good, alleviating pain, and doing a host of other worthy deeds. It appears not to have entered Tố's mind that the missionaries might sometimes abuse their religion and the Vietnamese people, and pave the way for the extension of French authority. Tố did not face up to the fact that the French were ambitious to take over the whole of Vietnam. Instead, he saw them as transient visitors with limited goals which did not include annexation. He did not understand the background to French

\textsuperscript{62} Chương Thầu và Dương Huy Văn, 'Những Đề nghị Cải Cách của Nguyễn Trưởng Tố', Nghiên Câu Lịch Sử 25, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{63} Văn Tấn, 'Nguyễn Trưởng Tố', Nghiên Câu Lịch Sử 23, p. ?.
imperialism or its full implications for Vietnam.

Trời's pacifist policy towards the French was severely criticised by Hoàng Nam, who reasoned: 'this policy reflects fear of the enemy's superior weapons and distrust of our own people's ability to carry on armed resistance.' However, Trời appears to have been motivated not so much by fear as by a desire to save needless bloodshed, in the face of an enemy which was unbeatable at that time. Moreover, Trời put forward his peace policy as a temporary expedient to enable the Court to carry out far-reaching reforms and subsequently reassert its power. Viewed in this perspective, Trời's calculated stand contrasted with that of the Nguyễn authorities, who simply accepted defeat before the French threat, without thinking of future recovery. Hoàng Nam also suggested that Trời disregarded the will of the people:

He was a scholar divorced from the demands and will of the people. He was even further divorced from other scholars, less educated than he, who had no chance of travelling overseas, but because they lived among the people, raised to the highest level of acclaim the heroic struggle of the people.

However, Nam's assessment is difficult to reconcile with Trời's consistent concern for the common people, as expressed in his memorials. His wish was not to see them struggling and dying in armed conflict, but living in harmony, in a peaceful and healthy atmosphere. Trời did not cut himself off from his people, even though he was a Christian; his repeated call for reform came from the depth of his heart, the heart of a patriot. His apologetic tone, as in 'To the Court I commit the crime of daring to raise major issues even

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Giá

64 Hoàng Nam, 'Tánh/Vai Trời Nguyễn Trưởng Trời Trong Lịch Sử Cần Ba Vì Việt Nam', Nguyễn Chân Lịch Sử 29, p. 37.
65 Ibid., p. 40.
though I am a lowly and humble person, indicates his acceptance of taking risks, while striving to convince the Court to pursue a policy of reform. Tô's patriotism is also reflected in his repeated offers of service to the country, especially in 1870, when France was at war with Germany, and he volunteered to go South to join in an assault against the French. Such attitudes affirm that Tô sought to serve his nation and not just his alien God.

Above all, Tô did not choose to serve the French. In this respect he contrasted with Trương Vinh Kỳ (1837-1897) who was a Western-educated Catholic, a great scholar, and a prolific writer on a wide range of subjects. Kỳ worked earnestly in the cultural field for the French and in the belief that Vietnam had much to learn from them. His prime aim was to promulgate Western studies, by means of Quốc Ngữ, among his own people and to provide the French with information about Vietnam and its culture. Yet, despite all these works, the patriotism of Kỳ has always been a subject of controversy, owing to his collaboration with the French. Nguyên Trưởng Tô, on the other hand, proved his patriotism beyond doubt and cleared himself of the suspicion of collaboration.

Overall, Tô's practical achievements were only three: the construction of the Sat canal, which the Governor of his native province asked him to undertake in 1866, the reconstruction of a house and chapel for Father Gauthier, which had been largely destroyed.

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67 Kỳ in his early days joined Phan Thanh Giản's mission to Paris as an interpreter for the French. In France, he was befriended by famous writers such as Victor Hugo and Paul Bert, who later became the Governor-General of Indochina. Upon his return, Kỳ took a teaching position at the School of Interpreters, set up by the French, and later became Editor of Gia Đình Báo, the first French sponsored magazine in Quốc Ngữ.
by fire, and the construction of an impressive church in Saigon.\textsuperscript{68} These works show that Tô had practical as well as academic skills, and that his progressive ideas did not result in his estrangement from his native society.

It is impossible to say now whether Vietnam would have escaped its fate if Tô's proposals for reforms had been carried out. Nevertheless, one can see that Tô was exceptional in nineteenth century Vietnam in that, although he was a Catholic, he was a good citizen and a great patriot. Tô's devotion to scholarship and service to his country did not achieve results in his time, but much later his memory helped provide the foundation for a future nationalist movement.

\textsuperscript{68} For more detail on these works, which won Tô the title Architect, read Phạm Đình Kiểm, 'Nguyễn Trung Tô, kiến trúc sư tiên khởi của ngành kiến trúc Việt Nam', Văn Hóa III, No. 4, (23 November 1961).
CHAPTER IV

NGUYỄN ĐỊNH CHIỂU (1822-1888)

AN IMMORTAL PATRIOTIC POET
Nguyen Dinh Chieu (1822-1888)

'My quill can pierce through many an enemy without becoming at all blunted'
Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, a blind poet from Cochinchina has received unqualified recognition for the outstanding qualities of his work. He has been praised as 'a great patriotic poet of the Vietnamese people',1 'a great anti-colonial poet, a soul shining with humanity and righteousness'2 and 'an immortal hero'.3 His reputation arises partly from his association with the early resistance movement against the encroaching power of the French. More particularly, his reputation is founded on the great literary merit of his writings which effectively convey his attitudes and reactions to the French invasion.

Chiểu's literary skill alone ensures him a place as a great Southern poet. The aim of this chapter is to show how his literary abilities were inextricably related to his patriotic concerns.

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu was born in 1822 into a Confucian family in Gia Định, the administrative centre of the South. He was the son of a low-ranking mandarin working on the staff of the Governor of Gia Định province. In 1833, during Lê Văn Khôi's insurrection against Minh Mạng, Chiểu's whole family fled to Huế. At the royal capital Chiểu had the chance to study the Chinese Classics. In 1840 he returned South and continued his studies at Gia Định. In 1843 he passed the first examination required of prospective scholar-officials (Thi Hđòng), and was promised the daughter of a wealthy man in marriage. But being ambitious to pursue a mandarinal career, the dream of most students at that time, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu postponed his marriage and returned

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1 Thái Mai, 'Nhà thơ lớn yêu nước của nhân dân Việt Nam' Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Hà Nội, Xã Hội, 1973, p. 96.
2 Hà Huy Giáp, 'Nguyễn Đình Chiểu nhà thơ lớn yêu nước,' Ibid., p. 65.
to Huế. There, he concentrated upon preparing for the higher examinations (*Thi Hội* and *Thi Bính*). In 1849, during the examination period, he received news of his mother’s death which necessitated his return to Gia Định to observe the traditional period of mourning. Since unfavourable winds prevented him from going home by sea, he had to make the slow overland journey. On the way he was exposed to fatigue and illness and it is said that the rigours of the journey, coupled with his grief, caused him deep suffering. Whatever the cause, he lost his sight in the course of the journey, at the age of twenty-eight. Moreover the Gia Định man withdrew his offer of his daughter and to Chieu it seemed like the end of his hopes and of his career. However, his suffering did not last long for he soon established a small school of Chinese Classics in his village of Bình Viê. He also began to study traditional medicine. His learning soon attracted many good students, some of them coming from remote villages in the neighbouring provinces of Bình Hòa and Định Thượng. Consequently, he earned considerable local prestige and was addressed as *nhα Chieu* (master Chieu) an appellation denoting affection and respect. In 1854 he married a sister of one of his students, who later gave him seven children. It was after his marriage that his literary career began.

Chieu’s writings were strongly coloured by contemporary political events. They can be divided into three groups: those written prior to French intervention in Cochinchina, those belonging to the period of intervention, and those describing the aftermath. Of these, the second and third groups are most significant and fall within the scope of this study, as Chieu referred in them to the resistance against the French, the nature of French ideology and conquest, and his own political stand. However, to gain an understanding of the

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4 According to Vietnamese custom, based on Confucianism, it was expected that a son should observe three year’s mourning for his parent.
poet himself, of his moral opinions and behaviour it is necessary to examine his first work, *Luc Văn Tiến.*

**EARLY YEARS**

*Luc Văn Tiến* was published in Nôm in 1856 and in Quốc Ngữ thirty-three years later. Chiêu wrote it with two purposes: first, to uphold virtue and human dignity and, second, for his own consolation and to sweep away for good his lost dreams. *Luc Văn Tiến* can be divided into 4 parts:

**Part I** (1-552): Luc Văn Tiến, a promising student, well versed in Confucian ethics and military strategy, answered the Emperor's summons to talented men to sit for an examination at the capital. On his journey he rescued Kiều Nguyệt Nga from being violated by robbers. He refused her offer of a reward and a love token of a silver hairpin and they parted, Nga still carrying love for Tiến in her heart.

**Part II** (553-1240): Even before the examination had begun Tiến was called home to mourn the death of his mother. His sorrow caused him to lose his sight. His page showed devotion by trying to seek a cure for Tiến and though both he and Tiến spent all their money Tiến did not recover his sight. When Tiến reached home, he was rejected by his fiancée and her father, who tried to murder him by abandoning him in a cave. He was later saved by a woodcutter and given refuge by a friend.

**Part III** (1241-1740): Meanwhile the beautiful Kiều Nguyệt Nga ran into misfortune. The Emperor wanted to give her in marriage to a barbarian king to avoid hostilities. She attempted suicide by jumping into the river, bearing with her the dream of her benefactor.
A fisherman rescued her and brought her to a pagoda.

Part IV: (1741-2246) Thanks to miraculous medicine Tien's sight was restored and he took first place in the examinations. The Emperor then sent him to quell the barbarous invaders. On the way home after his victory, he happened to find Nga at her hiding place. They were reconciled with the Emperor, who agreed to their marriage. Since the Emperor had no son, he later named Tien his successor. Under Tien's leadership the people enjoyed peace. Meanwhile all the wicked and dishonest characters who had ill-treated Tien met their death one way or another.

To some extent Luc Van Tien is autobiographical. Nevertheless, the poet succeeded in using Tien and Nga as symbols of ideal virtue: love of one's country, filial piety and conjugal fidelity. They strictly followed his moral code which he expressed at the beginning of his long story:

Everybody, listen attentively to this,
Be cautious first to avoid later risks.
For a man, loyalty and filial piety stand first.
For a woman, chastity and behaviour are two things to keep.

The poet also praised true friendship and the joy of chivalry:

To look on with folded arms when one can perform a benevolent deed
It certainly not the behaviour of a hero.

Most important, in Luc Van Tien Chieu successfully upheld his ideal of humaneness and righteousness by presenting a fierce struggle between two antagonistic forces: the first, an evil force composed of the mandarin (Oligarchy), the bourgeoisie and dishonest elements such as Tien's fiancée and her father; and second, a virtuous force represented by the common people such as Tien's page, the woodcutter, and the fisherman. In the end the poet placed victory in the hands of the virtuous people, more specifically Tien.

In this, his very first masterwork, Chieu focussed on the most
important aspects of Confucianism, namely the cardinal virtues of loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, and righteousness. Moreover, Mencius' teachings are strongly evident in the way that Tiến was chosen as best-suited to succeed to the throne and became renowned as a sage ruler, because people lived in harmony and enjoyed peace during his reign.

Lục Văn Tiến was written in the classic six-eight metre (Lục bát) with a simple vocabulary, but with great literary skill, and it contained an interesting plot. As a result, it captured many hearts and was very widely known. It was also warmly received by the French. Aubaret, the French Consul in Bangkok, who visited Vietnam in 1864 was the first translator of Lục Văn Tiến. He revealed in his introduction that its verses were sung by street singers and known to the mass of common people in Cochin-China. The foreword to a second translation of Lục Văn Tiến, by a Frenchman named Jeanneau, contained the following comment: 'Lục Văn Tiến is one of those few books which have the privilege of becoming a people's book.' Even the French Navy Captain remarked:

All the Vietnamese know Lục Văn Tiến by heart, and there is not a house where every evening the people do not chant some passages, even the children who do not yet understand their meaning.

THE RESISTANCE YEARS

When the French began to attack Đà Nẵng in January 1858, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's literary career entered a new phase. He became an anti-French poet. His poetry composed during the period of French

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8 A. Bouinais and A. Paulus, L'Indochine Française Contemporaine, Tome I, p. 263.
intervention (1859-1867) was directly inspired by the war. It was no longer intended to express his personal feelings but to voice the sufferings, discontent, and hatred of the mass of the people living under the impact of the French invasion, and their firm determination to throw off the foreign yoke. Furthermore it served to clarify his own political stand, a stand he maintained until his death in 1888.

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu’s first direct experience of French conquest came early in 1859 when French units, after having attacked Đà Nẵng for five months without much success, ventured southwards and attacked the port of Saigon, and Gia Định, Chiểu’s home town. During this chaotic period Chiểu left Gia Định and took refuge in Cần Giờ, his wife’s home town. His eight line poem Running From Bandits (Chạy Giặc), the very first of a series of anti-colonialist poems, described the gloom, disorder, and disaster which affected many people and even animals as a result of the French attack.

The poet used the term ‘bandits’ to emphasise the illegality of the actions of the French in taking people’s homes and property, and the chaos and destruction which followed in their wake. The last two lines serve on the one hand to criticize the Vietnamese authorities for failing to stop the invasion and to protect the people; on the other hand they suggest the enthusiasm and willingness of Chiểu to sanction any resistance to the foreign invaders, which could assist in the restoration of the natural order.

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Thơ Văn Yêu Nước Nam Bộ, p. 39.
Soon after his new home town, Cần Giuộc, fell to French attack, as did the districts of Tân An and Gò Công. Partisans rose to meet the invaders. His eloquent and touching Funeral Oration for Partisans in Cần Giuộc\(^\text{10}\) (Văn Thế Nghĩa Sĩ Cần Giuộc) provided a vivid image of the heroic struggle of a group of peasants armed with primitive weapons, fighting against the powerful invaders. The public began to acknowledge Chíeu as an anti-French poet. His Funeral Oration circulated far and wide through the Southern provinces, inspiring further resistance. The Ministry of Rites even made it known to the Royal Court in Huế. Prince Tùng Thiên Võng, touched by the poem, wrote an appreciation of the poet's work:

The scholar killed the enemy with his pen.
By this service to the country he already deserves admiration.\(^\text{11}\)

Princess Mai Am, herself a poetess, also expressed her emotion on reading the oration in an eight line poem which began:

With throbbing heart I read over and over the touching oration.
How deeply its eloquent style and firm spirit impress me!...
The masterpiece in national language will last forever,
There is no need to build a tomb to preserve his (Chíeu's) dry corpse.\(^\text{12}\)

The great success of the poem is summed up in the following remark:

The Funeral Oration for the sacrificed soldiers had an effect on those who were still alive, inciting their patriotism, their concern for the people and hatred of the enemy, and providing them with a deep hope that simple peasants, inspired by a good cause, could kill invaders.\(^\text{13}\)

In Funeral Oration for Partisans in Cần Giuộc Chíeu presented his heroes, the peasants of Vietnam – the defenders of the country. They

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\(^{10}\) Thể Văn Văn Nhân Nam Bộ, pp. 40-43. Thể Văn Nguyễn Đình Chíeu, pp. 250-254. For the English translation of the poem, see Trương Bửu Lâm, Patterns of Vietnamese Response, pp. 67-71.

\(^{11}\) & \(^{12}\) For complete poems see Thể Văn Nguyễn Đình Chíeu, pp. 250-254, and in the footnote Trần Thanh Mai, 'Là Cô ăn', Nguyễn Đình Chíeu, p. 387.

\(^{13}\) Cả Văn Thịnh, 'Truyện Thông Quê và Quê của Nam Bộ và Việt Nam với tinh thần đấu tranh của Nguyễn Đình Chíeu', Nguyễn Đình Chíeu, p. 159.
did not possess outstanding talents, military or intellectual, but they had the virtues found in Lục Vân Tiên. They did not possess an official title or honour like Hồn Minh, Lục Vân Tiên's friend. The new heroes had humble status: during peace time they were simply peasants who devoted their lives and efforts to tilling their beloved land, and who feared nothing but starvation:

Their hands were used only to raking, ploughing, planting and growing, They had not been trained to handle armour, guns, or flags.

When their land was violated, they voluntarily took up arms and followed their leaders against the invaders. Their willingness and eagerness to join in the resistance was described as follows:

No one forced them, nobody asked them to involve themselves in the great task, they just took up action without hesitation.

Here they were in marked contrast with the reluctant Nguyễn authorities and those officially responsible for the defence of the country.

Not only did they lack military training but also they possessed only primitive weapons such as bamboo spears and knives and tattered cotton clothes in place of armour. Nevertheless:

They did not wait for the drumbeats to move forward. They marched boldly onward, ignoring their enemies. They had no fear of French bullets, large or small They just advanced. They thrust their knives here and there, casting fear into the (French) soldiers and their Filipino mercenaries. They shouted at the front, they screamed as a man to drown the sound of the exploding naval guns.

By introducing the powerful arms of the French, such as guns and battleships, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu deliberately emphasised the untarnished spirit and the bravery of the Vietnamese. The poet also pointed out some good effects of the primitive weapons:

For artillery they struck their torch of straw, and yet were able to set on fire the house of the missionaries. In place of swords, they parried with knives,
and yet were able to chop off the head of a lieutenant.

However, when their weapons proved ineffective they preferred to die because:

What is the point of living in the style of heretical religious leaders, throwing away incense burners, and destroying ancestral altars; how sad is such behaviour. What is the point in living with alien soldiers, sharing their tasteless wine, and chewing their bread; how shameful. It would be better to die and more glorious to join our ancestors than to surrender to the French; living together with barbarians is truly miserable.

These lines clearly show those who took up arms against the French refused to compromise with aliens and their patterns of living. This attitude can be traced back to the original and deeply held belief that the French were far from being as civilized as they had claimed.

In the same Funeral Oration Chíêu spoke for the peasants, expressing hatred which they reserved forever for the so-called liberators:

Their evil smell of jackals has prevailed over the past three years. [And the people] hate their barbarous habits just as farmers hate weeds.... The sun and the moon shine brightly, but certainly not on the swarm of men who hang our goats and sell our dogs.

This attitude certainly gave rise to fierce opposition to aliens even at the cost of human lives. At the end of his Funeral Oration Chíêu made these examples of sacrifice more meaningful by linking them with honour and fame after death:

You die having paid your debt to the nation, people from the six provinces crown you with honour. You die and so are worshipped in shrines and temples, your fame will last for ever.

This was the first time any poet denounced a foreign invasion, and praised peasants - the volunteer fighters - in such powerful terms.

While the peasant-soldiers received Chíêu's sincere sympathy and warm treatment, no less did the resistance leaders obtain Chíêu's support. In particular Trương Công Bình, the first man to
lead an insurrection against the French in Gò Công, \^\textsuperscript{14} won great appreciation and admiration from Chíêu. This is shown by his composition of a funeral oration and twelve elegies\^\textsuperscript{15} dedicated to this hero alone. This partly reflected their close contact and mutual admiration and it should be noted that Đình also admired Chíêu greatly. On many occasions Đình sent his men to the poet for advice, and he once invited the poet to live in his military headquarters as a moral supporter of the resistance. But on account of his blindness, Nguyễn Đình Chíêu chose to stay with his family.\^\textsuperscript{16} Nevertheless he closely followed news of all anti-French resistance, paying particular attention to that of Đình.

Dình refused the Court's offer of a high ranking position in a central province and remained among his own people to continue the struggle. This action received ardent support from the poet:

\begin{quote}
In following the will of the people he [Dình] undertook the pain and responsibility of becoming their [the people's] leader.\^\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
While refusing to accept the offer, he took up the red seal, to the delight of the people.\^\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

By supporting this course, Chíêu indicated his belief that it was more important to serve the people than to serve the King, especially when the King had miscalculated the ambitions of the invaders.

\^\textsuperscript{14} For the insurrection of Đình, see pages 55-57 of Chapter II.

\^\textsuperscript{15} For full texts, see Thô Văn Nguyễn Đình Chíêu, pp. 254-256._TVYNB, pp. 44-52. Thái Bạch, Thị Văn Quốc Cẩm, pp. 21-26.

\^\textsuperscript{16} Nguyễn Văn Tân, 'Nguyễn Đình Chíêu một nhà Trí Thức Yêu Nhạc' Nguyễn Cầu Lịch Sử'\^\textsuperscript{43}, p. 5. Quảng Đức, 'Bản ca Gò Chíêu', Cầu Tập... , p. 36.

\^\textsuperscript{17} Thô Văn Nguyễn Đình Chíêu, p. 264.

\^\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 255.
Bính's disregard for his own life for the sake of his country received equally touching praise:

No doubt he saw the force of the French with its various stratagems.
On the water, copper-coated boats, iron-clad ships, the guns of their artillery booming endlessly.
On land, the Filipino mercenaries and policemen shoot, their bullets falling like a shower of rain....

However, once one's body has been dedicated to one's country it is no matter if it remains or is destroyed.
To serve the living is the right deed, regardless of failure or success.19

These lines also strongly show Chiêu's Confucian conviction that righteousness must be upheld, no matter how dire the consequences.

The death of Bính was undoubtedly a painful blow to the poet, but Chiêu described his sorrow more in terms of the loss to his country than of his personal loss.

[I] shed tears for the country at a difficult time when its Lord has gone, adding more complications and sorrow.
[I] uttered lamentations for the country full of unrest, which, in looking to its true King, dwelt only in frustration and confusion.20

The lines convey the incapacity of the ruler in a time of crisis to give positive leadership against the French and also describe the devastating effect of the passing of Bính, the national hero. The poet used the image of 'baby chicks losing their mother hen' to express the confusion and feeling of deprivation among Bính's followers after his death. Furthermore, Chiêu treated the heroism and fall of Bính in a compelling manner:

Sorrow overflowed in the appearance of the three provinces.
When the flag flies, the sun and moon will shine and the drum will resound again.21

and

On the plantation the flowers mourned their master,
On the waters of Bảo Ngọc the waves wept for the loss of the general.
The cloud hung low on Trương Cốc, the operation march came

19 Ibid., p. 265.
20 Thọ Văn Nguyễn Bính Chiêu, p. 268.
21 Ibid., p. 267.
to a halt.
The moon faded on Gò Rúa, the dog barks ceased.22

The death in 1868 of Phan Tông, the resistance leader of Ba Tri District, the third home town of the poet, received similar heartfelt treatment in a series of ten elegies:23

The hero preferred to die rather than submit to French rule, And fortunately he fell mortally wounded in the field. He disregarded the bullet of accusation, naming him a disloyal citizen, which hung clearly before his eyes, And retained firmly in his hand a sword turned against the enemy.

In the second line there is evidence of the bitterness and irony in the poet's attitude towards the Nguyễn Court which, under French pressure, was forced to treat resistance fighters and patriotic leaders as 'disloyal citizens'. Thus it was 'fortunate' that Tông died on the battlefield, earning the honour of his countrymen, rather than living to be captured and executed as a traitor at the behest of the French. Chìeu expressed the righteousness of Tông's actions by showing the response his death evoked in Nature.

New Ba Tri District lacks his presence, Bitter winds, miserable rains are mourning. The garden is longing for the coming of spring while the flowers wither. The rice fields shed tears for their master, and the plants waste away.

As in his elegies for Trường Công Bình, the poet used such images as flowers' mourning and waves, winds, and rains weeping to convey his belief in the warm intercorrelation between Heaven and Humanity, especially when the latter was following a righteous course.

The resolute spirit of Tông like that of Trường Bình was given

22 Ibid., p. 258. In the poem 'The plantation' refers to the virgin soil which Bình made into farming district, whereas Bảo Ngọc, Trindrical Cốc and Gò Rúa were places where Bình staged resistance.

23 For full texts of ten elegies, see Thơ Văn Nguyễn Đình Chíêu, pp. 270-76. TVNRR, pp. 53-55. Thái Bách, Thơ Văn Quốc Cảm, pp. 29-33.
eternal recognition:

The loyal and righteous citizen deserves an unqualified epitaph. The universe acknowledges his everlasting fame.
His great mind is spotless like dew and snow,
His spirit shines on mountains and rivers for a thousand Autumn's.

Thus Phan Töst's heroism was assured by the manner of his death, a heroism undiminished by the fact that he was fighting a lost war. His soldier's sacrifice was fitting because of the rightness of his actions, even though the outcome of his passing was disastrous.

In Funeral Oration for Partisans from Six Provinces 24 (Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Lực Tinh), which appeared in late 1867, Chíệu sounded far from optimistic about his people's struggle. He still regarded them as most worthy of his admiration, but at this stage the poet seemed more concerned about the numerous deaths. He made no attempt to praise their bravery or willingness to sacrifice themselves for the country. Nor did he mention their disregard of superior French weapons. He emphasised his deep sorrow and hatred for the French, which still burned after many years:

They claimed to bring a new policy, but in fact the French came to steal the land. Since then they only create hatred and anger.... They exploited people, reducing them to a level of abject poverty, amassed private property, imposed heavy punishment on women and children, burned houses and stole animals...
Over ten years they (the Vietnamese) have lived a wretched life, under interrogation, arrest, and exile. No limit has been placed on the killing of the young or even the old.... The people were dropped on an open fire
The enemy extracted their fat.

More important, the poet's bitter and detailed denunciation of French colonialism is well reflected through the above words. He did not hesitate to lay bare in harsh language the policy of exploitation

\[24\] For the complete Funeral Oration see Thơ Văn Nguyễn Đình Chíệu, pp 276-282. TVVNB, pp. 57-60.
which the French applied in their conquered land, instead of carrying out their claim of spreading civilization.

To describe the aftermath of the French policy of 'assimilation', Chíeu painted a picture of a world of spirits and ghosts which enmeshed Cochinchina:

Under the sky of Gia Định, on bright evenings
the spirits cast their misty shadows,
On the land of Biên Hòa on pale moonlit nights,
the ghosts light their lanterns of flickering flames.
In An- Hâ district during day-time, the wind blows hard in the trees and dust-filled whirl-winds rise by the citadel.
On Long-Trưng waters at sunset, vapour cast its mystery,
fire flames rise, the ghostly military row their boats.

In the above quotation, and in Funeral Oration for Partisans from the Six Provinces as a whole, there is a total absence of the hero-worship, and determination to fight found in the earlier poems. The theme of glory and ever-lasting fame is lacking. Instead the poet concentrates on the return of the dead partisans and the plight of innocent people. He stresses the lingering attachment of the dead to their homeland and the fact that their souls cannot rest because peace has not come and the French are still advancing. In using such images the poet aimed to express pathos rather than excite further resistance. It can be that although in late 1867 the French had not achieved victory in North and Central Vietnam, their successful conquest of the whole South had greatly influenced Chíeu. He seemed to have lost hope in the outcome of armed resistance, even though the people were still undefeated in spirit. So many lives had been lost in the struggle—including many of his students, good friends, and even his own

25 Chíeu's best friend and classmate, Đỗ Đình Thọai, a native of Gò Công whom the French called 'District Chief Thọai' was killed. Đỗ Đức Lã, another good friend of Chíeu, was also killed in the anti-French struggle.
younger brother\textsuperscript{26} that Chieu did not talk of possible revival or counterattack from outside his Southern region.

Chieu not only praised the deeds of resistance leaders, and partisans, but also took a controversial stand on the actions of Phan Thanh Gian, the Viceroy of three Western provinces, whose failure to oppose French forces provoked a bitter attack from the Nguyen authorities. The eight line \textit{Elegy for Phan Thanh Gian} (\textit{Diễu Phan Thanh Gian})\textsuperscript{27} reflects the deep sympathy and esteem Chieu held for Gian. In the poet's opinion, Gian was placed in an impossible position and no blame attached to him for the loss of the provinces, whose fall seemed inevitable. Thus the poem began: 'Our mountains and rivers were crushed, but whose fault was it.'

Then he went on to praise the devotion and service which Chieu recognised, that Gian gave, in three successive reigns. Gian was a model of personal virtues for the Cochinchinese, and Chieu ascribed Gian's failure to defend the three Western provinces to lack of official support and inadequate facilities in the areas under his control rather than to his neglect of duty:

\begin{quote}
At the Northern post evening came without a message.
In the Southern citadel only the melancholy song of the cuckoo filled the chilly nights.
\end{quote}

The fact that Chieu regarded Gian as righteous and believed that his honour was not soiled, indicated his understanding of Gian's action. Chieu's attitude may have stemmed from an appreciation of Phan Thanh Gian's personal qualities arising out of traditional orthodoxy, though this suggests a contradiction in Chieu's mind. For while he praised the mandarin most responsible for defusing

\textsuperscript{26} Nguyen Đình Huân.

popular resistance, he was, at the same time, acting as the poetic spokesman for the spontaneous peasant uprising against the French. The contradiction seems to be resolved, however, by the apparent change in the value Nguyễn Đình Chieu placed on human life, which only at this time had he come to regard as precious. Gian's actions saved the lives of his troops, who would otherwise have been engaged in suicidal opposition.

**DUONG TƯ HÀ MẬU**

**Điều Tù Hà Mậu**, Nguyễn Đình Chieu's second major work in Nôm was composed over the period of approximately ten years spanning the time in which he completed Lục Văn Tiên and wrote his resistance poems. In it Chieu attacked heretical ideologies and superstitions as well as the military and cultural intervention of the French. This was because he wished to uphold the integrity of Confucian ideology, which he saw as the basis of Vietnamese culture as well as of the Vietnamese state. Furthermore, an important aspect in Điều Tù Hà Mậu was its role in expressing Chieu's concern with the practical applications of beliefs to the contemporary situation of Vietnam. Since Chieu felt that concentrated effort from the people was needed to oust the French aggressors, he used Điều Tù Hà Mậu to advocate such effort and to condemn any alternative courses of action.

Nguyễn Văn Nghĩa, who first discovered the manuscript of Điều Tù Hà Mậu, tells us that the blind Master Chieu began this work while staying at the house of his friend, Lê Quang Thịnh, in Tân Thuận Đông. Chieu composed the work not only to protect Confucianism but also to please Thịnh, who took down Chieu's dictation of Điều Tù Hà Mậu. Nghĩa knew the nephew of Lê Quang Thịnh,
and so had a chance to see the manuscript. Phan Van Hûm, the first publisher of Từ Hâ Mâu, remarked in his book The Hidden Soul of Master Chiêu (Nơi Lòng Đô Chiêu): 'Possibly this volume of poetry pleased the poet's contemporaries, which explains why it was welcomed and preserved. However, it was not published owing to its very blunt expressions.' On its theme a Catholic professor recently wrote:

In Từ Hâ Mâu Nguyễn Bình Chiêu cruelly attacked Buddhism and more especially Catholicism - which he referred to as 'heretical religion'. To Chiêu, the French used Catholicism as an excuse for their conquest and to bewitch people.

This explains the ban which the French placed on the long poem from the time of its composition - the early 1860's - until publication was finally allowed in 1938. But soon after its appearance the French suppressed the circulation of the first edition. The second edition of Từ Hâ Mâu was brought out in Saigon in 1957 but even then eighty-seven verses were expurgated because of their vulgar defamation of Buddhist and Christian monks and nuns. Thus this major work was ill-received by the South Vietnamese as well as by the French authorities.

Từ Hâ Mâu is the story of Từ, a follower of Buddhism.

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28 This information originally appeared in the magazine Mai 35 (31 October 1936), Saigon, and it is reproduced in the preface in Phan Văn Hûm, Từ Hâ Mâu, Sài Gòn, Tân Việt, 1964. Thu Văn Nguyễn Bình Chiêu, p. 207.


32 This work has not been published in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
and Hà Mậu, a follower of Christianity. Each was unable to understand
the deep ethics of his religion. They both fell into a state of doubt
and wondered whether they would go to Heaven after death. Finally
they approached Lão Nhân, a Confucian, for guidance hoping for a
miracle which would enable them to visit their dream world. They
travelled through the five layers of sky but saw nobody, not a single
Buddhist soul nor a Christian soul. They became disillusioned. Only
when they got to the highest layer of sky (Huyền Thiên) did they see
the 'Great Sage' whom they described as follows:

Sitting on a precious throne, under a gold parasol
Confucius with his impressive and appealing physiognomy.
Was attended by many good spirits.

To their disappointment, none of the people they saw at Huyền Thiên
followed their creeds. Afterwards they went on to visit Hell. There,
y they witnessed diabolical monsters and ugly devils exacting
punishments on bad people ranging from witches, quacks, unfaithful
people, corrupt officials, court flatterers, disloyal servants to
some of Diồng Tề's and Hà Mậu's relatives. The two were not given
enough time to make any enquiry as the devils promptly dragged them
out of Hell.

What they glimpsed persuaded them to change their religious
beliefs as they had seen there was no such thing as the Catholic or
Buddhist after-life in Heaven, only an after-life in Hell for those
who misbehave when alive. The two, upon their return, told people
about their experiences. The King heard of them and rewarded their
efforts, at the same time promulgating an edict advising people not
to follow Christianity or Buddhism.

The story is a piece of religious propaganda with a confident
tone, whose purpose is disguised a little by the introduction of
irrelevancies. Diồng Tề Hà Mậu is unique in revealing every nuance
of the poet's attitude towards the three ideologies, their followers,
and their place in his endangered country. In the preface of Dương Tù Hồ Mậu Chiếu wrote:

Up to the present time everybody in the civilized world has given his attention to right doctrine (Confucianism). Now a false doctrine (tà đạo) appears which not only seduces the populace but also harms people ten times more than Buddhism.

Any student born in this epoch must realize this fact and should not tolerate Catholicism. Tolerance of a religion which has robbed me of my sleep and my food, and which causes me great anxiety is impossible. 33

These words strongly convey Chiếu's abhorrence of Catholicism, whose blossoming and diffusion in Vietnam were to be vehemently opposed. He called for a united stand in the task of expelling such a dangerous religion. Chiếu believed that Catholicism posed a major threat to the defense of Vietnam, through its doctrine of an after life in Paradise, and its stress on Jesus Christ as the Saviour, devotion to whom eclipsed in importance loyalty and service to one's country.

Chiếu portrayed the main character in the story, Hồ Mậu as typical of the Christians in Vietnam who, fearful of eternal damnation and believing in salvation through Jesus Christ, dedicated his life to saying prayers and attending mass in the hope that 'with an Amen the Holy Jesus would listen to him'. 34

In Chiếu's opinion, such blind dedication virtually led Christians to neglect other duties entrusted to them and be unmindful of events and the threat of foreign invasion:

What is the point of saying prayers and attending mass while neglecting to be grateful to one's parents. What kind of religion is that? 35

The gratitude alluded to here is the responsibility to preserve and

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33 Nguyễn Công Khai, Nguyễn Đình Chiếu..., p. 37.
34 Phan Văn Hữm, Dương Tù Hồ Mậu, p. 22.
35 Ibid., p. 113.
defend what parents and ancestors have built over the years. Chíeu was referring to maintaining the land of Vietnam, the national integrity, the traditional values which were under French threat.

Chíeu sought to discredit Catholicism by emphasising its association with the enemies of Vietnam. He portrayed the preachers of that religion, the French, as follows:

The seaborne barbarians of the West
Rich as they are and yet crafty
Using lies and ruses
They conduct their business.36

In the same passage Chíeu explained how Christianity was introduced into Vietnam. He told a story of how long ago in order to punish the malicious French, an angry God sent a Sky Dog (Thiền Câu) down to earth to eat their souls. Very worried, the King of France could only say prayers. But one night in a dream he saw a woman and her child, who were both naked and undergoing punishments (implying Mary and Jesus Christ). They informed him that they were punished for the crimes of the people, and could only be released if France adopted Catholicism which Chíeu referred to as Dutch religion (Hoa Lac).37 Hence Catholicism developed throughout France since the worship of Catholicism appeased the Sky Dog. However, the Sky Dog still wanted once a year, for a hundred successive years, to satisfy his hunger with their souls. Realising the difficulty of securing enough souls for the Sky Dog from his own people, the French King saw the advantage of finding souls elsewhere. After much thought he launched Catholic propaganda outside his kingdom, using charms and missionaries to

36 These lines were of the eighty-seven lines expurgated by the Vietnamese authorities, so were not printed in Phan Văn Hüm, Định Tự Hoa Mẫu. See Nguyễn Công Khaí, Nguyễn Ênh Chíeu, pp. 96 and 97.

37 Christianity became known as 'Dutch Religion' because it was first introduced to Vietnam by missionaries who arrived in Dutch merchant ships.
attract followers. Then when the followers died, their souls would
be brought back to France. As the numbers of followers increased and
their souls accumulated the French themselves could escape their
calamity.

It is hard to say whether Chieu believed this story, but his
intention to reveal French cunning is obvious. He stressed that the
expansion of Christianity was for the benefit of France alone and that
the French missionaries, who were false to their own teachings, were
pawns of their government. Chieu saw the missionaries' purpose as
being to mislead people, drawing them into spiritual captivity, and
he pointed out that Vietnamese converts themselves were unaware of
the evil motivation underlying missionary activity, which was revealed
in the story of the Sky Dog.

In an effort to destroy Catholicism, Chieu strove to disparage
the miracles as myths and to heap scorn on aspects of Christianity
which seemed to conflict with Confucian principles and practices.
It seemed inconceivable to Chieu that Holy Water could wash away sin.
In Dỗng Tả Hà Mậu he, therefore, ridiculed the belief in Holy Water
through the statements of Tả, a Buddhist follower:

Jesus Christ had good virtue
So why was he crucified with his legs and arms in chains?
The Virgin Mary had been benevolent
So why was she punished and put on a bed of nails...?
They talked about the power of their Holy Water
Why didn't they use it then to lighten their misery?
But alas Jesus Christ was crucified unto Death
Who could now become a saint in his place to continue
to produce Holy Water.38

In this passage Chieu interpreted the death of Christ as a clear
indication of the ineffectiveness of Holy Water. Later he furthered
his argument by showing its failure to help the self-proclaimed followers
of Christ in Vietnam.

38 Nguyễn Công Khai, Nguyễn Đình Chieu, p. 92.
If God atoned for all human crimes
Why is there still a need to build prisons for criminals.\(^3^9\)

Ironically, Vietnamese history records that it was necessary to build more prisons to house the missionaries and their followers. Against this background the poet poked fun at the missionaries in the following manner:

I heard that in a certain district
Another chief missionary was thrown into jail.
Where has his Holy Water gone?
They should have used it to wash away his crime
instead of calling for [French] help and protection.\(^4^0\)

Again, the poet attributed the misfortunes and misdeeds of missionaries to the ineffectiveness of Holy Water, pointing out that the missionaries had to seek assistance from temporal powers rather than spiritual ones, to regain their freedom.

The answer given by Hà Mậu, a Catholic, when asked to describe the mass, shows that Chieu regarded it as a vulgar and empty ritual which was barely understood by those Vietnamese followers who attended:

I saw a statue on the cross
And at times I heard prayers....
But most of the time I saw priests
Distributing breadcrumbs, carrying Holy Wine, and muttering.\(^4^1\)

Chieu saw Catholicism as debilitating Vietnamese opposition to the French and drew a parallel between its effect and that of opium, which the French used to weaken those who had not given way to Catholicism.

Once the people are crazy with French religion
They let their country be taken away without defending it at all.
Even if they can avoid being deluded,
They still do not hesitate to grasp the opium
[which the French] hand over,
Day and night they cling to their pipes,
How can they then think of raising opposition against the barbarians.\(^4^2\)


The people are described as being lulled into oblivion, forgetting their duties. While Chieu was critical of the French, he was equally critical of the Vietnamese for their foolishness in failing to recognize the insidious French policy and in welcoming changes advocated by the French.

Chieu's contempt for French collaborators and traitors was vehement in Dưỡng Tổ Hạ Mậu. He told them explicitly:

Even if you look glorious, you are in reality a mere subordinate.
Your body, which serves as a buffalo or a horse for people to ride on, it is something less than human....
Do not covet wealth in time of decadence
Setting traps for birds and rabbits, you might fall in a trap yourself.
For someone else's sake you exert yourself to catch animals
One day when you can no longer catch rabbits someone will end up eating you.43

Here again Chieu brought out not only the indignity of working for an alien master, but also what was to him the reality of French colonial rule, whereby those who served the French were exploited and victimised.

For all these reasons the poet felt a great need to waken people from their torpor to make them recognise France's falsehood and her cunning religion. Instead they should come to acknowledge their duties within this world, set about exterminating Christianity, and foster the fighting spirit of the people. The poet used his characters, Châu Năng, Hà Năng and Hạ Mậu to put across his message that Christians should give up their religion. These people, once pious Christians, now realised the nonsense and irrelevance of the religion, and so determined to abandon it and speak against it. Hạ Mậu expressed deep regret that he had wasted effort and time on Catholicism. Meanwhile Châu Phan, the teacher of Hạ Mậu stated:

43 Phan Văn Hùng, Dưỡng Tổ Hạ Mậu, p. 59.
Please urge Châu Kỳ
To burn all books of heretical prayers,
As three generations of devotion still end in nothing.
Now follow only the right religion, by returning to Confucianism.\textsuperscript{44}

Another believer also wanted his whole family to listen to his advice that

\begin{quote}
[They] should drop Dutch religion
As a precaution against their souls being eaten by the French dog.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

Chieu's criticisms of Christianity were not totally new; he more or less summarized and capped many decades of anti-Christian feelings deeply held by the majority of the Vietnamese and especially by the Nguyễn rulers. In the early 19th century four Vietnamese, ex-priests, jointly produced a book entitled Tây Dương Gia Tô Bí Lưc (The Secret about French Catholicism). It contains a great body of arguments against Catholicism, but its main conclusion is that the French used Catholicism to further their imperialist ambitions.\textsuperscript{46}

Part of an edict issued in March 1857 serves as an illustration of the official attitude towards Catholicism:

French Catholicism forbids the cult of ancestors and Gods. To cheat and to charm their followers the preachers speak of Paradise and Holy Water. Knowing that the nation can never survive such nonsense these wicked preachers present to the people the image of Jesus undergoing harsh punishments, to encourage the ignorant to become martyrs. So dangerous is this creed.\textsuperscript{47}

Chieu, however, was more wide-ranging and more penetrating in his attack on religion. As Nguyễn Công Khai pointed out, the court only attacked Catholicism and left other religions alone, inspite of their

\textsuperscript{44} Nguyễn Công Khai, Nguyễn Đình Chieu, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 96.
\textsuperscript{46} For details about this book, see Trần Văn Giảm..., Sơ Phạt Triển Của Tọ Tây Dương..., pp. 327-334.
\textsuperscript{47} E. Louvet, La Cochinchine Religieuse, pp. 183-184.
being equally useless in the fight against the aggressors.\textsuperscript{48} Moreover Chieu seemed to cry out against anyone who lacked patriotism, irrespective of their religion, be it Buddhism, Confucianism, or Christianity. All those who refused to take part in defending the country against the enemy, or who under the disguise of moral leadership lulled the people into submission, were condemned by the poet.

In Đặng Tả Hà Mậu the Buddhist follower, Đặng Tả, came in for bitter criticism on grounds of selfishness, and lack of concern—signs of an irresponsible attitude towards his country. Đặng Tả behaved no better than the contemptible Christian, Hà Mậu. He gave prayers to Buddha and spent money on the construction of pagodas, temples for his personal benefit. Chieu described Đặng Tả's so-called services in this manner:

For the birth of a child to continue the family line
He prayed at pagodas, shrines, and sacred places.\textsuperscript{49}

Then when Tả had a son, he entered upon a religious life to maintain his peace of mind. Chieu viewed this action as a deliberate move to avoid taking part in society. Chieu used the characters which Tả met on his way to enter a religious life to satirize Tả's selfish attitude and his appearance as a Buddhist monk:

The hair and beard are manly signs
Created by the parents, why should you shave them all off?
...You still owe gratitude for the rice, the vegetables and the fish [you eat] and the clothes [you wear], and the land granted you by the King.
You avoid corvee and taxes by entering the monastery.
If in the world there are many such monks
On whom can the King rely...\textsuperscript{50}

Engrossed in the notion of renunciation
They virtually ignore the phrase of loyalty and filial piety.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} Nguyễn Công Khải, Nguyễn Đình Chieu, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{49} Phan Văn Hân, Đặng Tả Hà Mậu, p. 26.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 46.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 89.
The above lines convey clearly Chieu's ideological struggle against Buddhism because it preached renunciation, affirming the vanity of the world, and encouraged a pre-occupation with unworldly matters. Chieu, through his criticism, sought to make the Buddhists face their real world - responsibilities and duties. In other words, when their country was endangered, the Buddhist followers should have taken part in overcoming the country's trouble.

Apart from attacking their lack of loyalty and filial piety, Chieu mentioned the Buddhists' religious abuses, which made them unworthy of people's respect.

They pretend to say prayers
Strike the gong and let the Buddhist door open to visitors
Their mouths utter 'Buddha Amida'
But their eyes flirt with the women devotees of the pagodas.
To alleviate the sadness they fool round with nuns,
When happy they visit the wives of their friends or brothels...
In public they pretend to be vegetarians
But back in their own room, they regularly enjoy meat and wine.52

Chieu's criticism of the bonzes parallels the writing of Trương Hán Siêu, one of the great Confucians of the 12th century:

Scoundrels, who had lost all notion of Buddhist asceticism, only thought of taking possession of beautiful monasteries and gardens, building for themselves luxurious residences and surrounding themselves with a host of servants. People became monks by the thousands, so as to get food without having to plough and clothes without having to weave...53

Even the Confucians who studied the Chinese Classics, but failed to apply their principles in their personal life and in administration, did not escape the poet's attack. The character Trần Kỳ in the story Dạ Song Tả Hạp Mường, for instance:

No doubt he has learned Chinese
But how could he manage not to study the Analects
[Of Confucius] on how to teach the world...

52 Ibid., p. 88.
His heart is dedicated to the word 'benevolence' 
But he disregarded the affairs of household and of state.\textsuperscript{54} 

Even bad rulers, like the Nguyễn Kings who only loved to 
consolidate their power and maintain their great domains did not 
escape Chieu's attack: 

*All the year round the people were compelled 
to provide cheap labour to build citadels and fortresses. 
The men are emaciated, the country is exhausted.*\textsuperscript{55} 

Chieu's treatment of religions is understandable in the light of events 
taking place during the ten years in which he wrote *Đồng Tổ Hà Mậu*. 
Vietnam was beset by the successful French aggression in Cochinchina, 
the French were using missionaries and Vietnamese catholic converts 
for political purposes to overcome resistance, and yet the Court was 
pursuing a policy of appeasement. Chieu was striving to give the people 
a rallying point in the midst of chaos: he created a Confucian Heaven, 
a place of reward, not for the blest, but for the virtuous and loyal 
people. While he himself was not free from religious bigotry, his 
motivations were less doctrinal than economic and political. Christians 
and Buddhists were condemned not so much for their beliefs as for 
their actions in furthering the French cause or for their inaction in 
withdrawing to a monastic existence while their country was in 
desperate need. Nguyễn Văn Hoan has further observed that Confucianism 
was the only viable rallying point: 

*It is easy to understand why Chieu placed his trust in 
Confucianism and believed in the capacity of Confucianism 
to rescue the country, because history at the time offered 
Nguyễn Đình Chieu no alternative but Confucianism.*\textsuperscript{56} 

\textsuperscript{54} Phan Văn Hụm, p. 95. 
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 58. 
\textsuperscript{56} Nguyễn Văn Hoan, 'Tự Lược Văn Tiến qua Đồng Tổ Hà Mậu', *Nguyễn Đình Chieu*, p. 552.
The hope of Nguyễn Đình Chieu to see his country free of barbarians and their Catholic ideology gradually faded. When French civil rule superseded French military government, indicating the end of the phase of conquest and the affirmation of French domination, Chieu came to realise the impracticability of the situation. The only choice left to him was to hold fast to his defiant attitude and maintain his personal integrity in the face of defeat. That effort shows itself in his last masterpiece  

"Người Tiêu Văn Tập Y Thuật" (Discussions on medicine between the Fisherman and the Woodcutter) which he is believed to have completed in 1874. This major work did not come to light until long after his death in 1888, and was not published until 1952.

The story is set in U-Yên, the land which Thạch Tấn had ceded to the Khít dân barbarians. The plot concerns Mạng Thọ Triệu, a woodcutter and Bào Tử Phúc, a fisherman. They decided to go in search of Nhân Sư whom they heard was a prominent scholar and famous physician. They hoped he would instruct them so that they could improve the life of their families and neighbours. On their way to U-Yên, the retreat of Nhân Sư, the two encountered many obstacles and passed many places, symbolising the rough road of life which leads...
to perfection. They also happened to meet Bảo Đần and Bồng Nhận Môn, two disciples of Nhận Sử, who taught them medicine and informed them that Nhận Sử was away from home. The four joined in a discussion of morality, honour, politics, and life.

Then came the news that Nhận Sử, approached by an enemy envoy, blinded himself to avoid serving as a personal physician to the enemy King of Liao. Bảo Đần left immediately to see Nhận Sử. However, the fisherman and the woodcutter, feeling anxious for home, left Bàn Kỳ, after vowing to return to receive training from Nhận Sử himself.

On the way home Bảo and Mông, caught in a heavy storm, got lost in a forest and spent the night in a grotto. During the night they saw a group of soldiers leading to trial five people including a witch, a quack, and a monk followed by a swarm of ghosts who acted as prosecutors. The soldiers invited them to attend the court and afterwards advised them to lead a good life, behave like dedicated physicians, and bear in mind the saying 'Phước Bên Hòa Trở' (good is rewarded by good, badness is punished). The following morning they realised what they had seen the previous night was nothing but a dream. The place where they had slept was a sacred place for the worship of gods. Fortunately a kind old man directed them to the correct way home. However, they witnessed another incident, that of a quack accidentally killing a patient by administering the wrong medicine. In this way the woodcutter and the fisherman came to realise the need to be good and honest physicians.

After family reunions, they both gave up their original careers and took up medicine. They secured enough money to purchase medical books and returned to Bàn Kỳ to receive first-hand instruction in medicine from Nhận Sử. Thereafter they became famous and highly esteemed through their charitable work in healing people.
Superficially this long story in verse is about medicine, but studied in depth it reveals a moral message for the time of chaos through the words of the characters, who carry Chiêu's thoughts, feelings, and subconscious preoccupation with his own situation. There is no mistaking the poet's intention to attack the Court and especially Emperor Tự Đức for conceding Cochinchina to France. The parallel situation of the lands U-Yến and of Vietnam is clear. Chiêu wrote the beginning of his story as follows:

From the time Thạch Tân came to the throne
The land U-yến was given away to the Khứt Ban barbarians.
The people lived in misery and sorrow,
As the whole land now belonged to Liao.
Within the country many scholars
Buried their talents and covered their fame
Becoming woodcutters and fishermen and
Following the life of hermits.  

The two main characters in the story - the woodcutter and the fisherman - are revealed as scholars in retreat, who refused to serve the invaders and who only tried to improve themselves for the benefit of their people. The stand of the two characters, therefore, should be regarded as the attitude of withdrawal, adopted by the poet in the last phase of his life - withdrawal, here, involved a complete disassociation from the incompetence of the rulers.

The description by the woodcutter and the fisherman of their ceded land clearly conveyed Chiêu's attitude to the weak Nguyễn court and the national disintegration:

Just look at the state of the country,
It is pitifully subdivided into four to five parts.
Longing for wealth and competing for power
the King and his officials exchange malevolent glances
day and night.

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60 For the medical aspects of the story, see Drs. Nguyễn Đình Cát and Lê Văn Lân, 'Les principes de Deontologie Médicale, après l'ouvrage Ngú Tieu Văn Dáp Y Thuật,' Sách Tập Những Bài Báo Về Nguyễn Đình Chiêu, pp. 263-277.

61 Thơ Vấn Nguyễn Đình Chiêu, p. 286.
The people have been drained of their strength
They must arm themselves daily, yet pay monthly taxes
for the building of palaces.
A group of flattering mandarins show their stupid faces.
As a result the barbarians extend their domineering presence.
Resistance ends in numerous deaths,
Blood flows into rivers and corpses pile into mountains.\(^{62}\)

His indictment against the King and the Court was that they sought only
personal advancement and power: they were unmindful of the welfare of
the country as a whole, even while their subjects lay down their lives
for Vietnam.

His deep and lingering sorrow that the country lacked a powerful
ruler and that national defense was neglected found expression in the
following lines:

The flowers half cry half laugh,
Expressing confusion at the encounter of good old friends.
The grass and leaves wave here and there
As if to ask: 'Where is the eastern King.
By the mountain the rocks remain bending
As if begging for mercy and compassion.
The birds twitter on branches,
As if they want to inform of human suffering.
The winds blow, rustling through the bamboo trees,
As if clearing way for the coming of a physician.
Beneath the mountain the brook runs, murmuring
As if enquiring 'who creates this scene'.
Spring days have come, but the scenery is not at all of Spring.
Oh miserable rains and bitter winds, when will you be calm.\(^{63}\)

The impromptu poem composed by Nhãp Môn, Nhãn SúD's disciple, while
he was exchanging political thoughts with the woodcutter and the
fisherman voiced a similar theme. The poem reads as follows:

Flowers and grass despondently wait for the eastern wind.
Lord of Spring, where are you, absent or present.
The cloud hangs on the Northern pass awaiting news from
the messenger-swallow.
The day ends in the Southern mountain silently.
The old country has become a different land.
Rain or shine, how can one share the same sky [with the enemies].
Whenever the Sage pours down his grace
A fresh rain will come to purify all rivers and mountains.\(^{64}\)

\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 465.
\(^{63}\) Ibid., p. 299.
\(^{64}\) Ibid., p. 355.
The references to nature in the two quotations convey two meanings: at one level, the plants, rocks, and animals reflect the disquiet and confusion of the human condition, because of the interrelations between Heaven and nature, both of which depended for their well-being on blessings emanating from the King; at the other level, which is more individualistic, the mood of nature reflects Chieu's own depression over the impasse to which the nationalist cause had come.

Chieu's state of depression is a major feature in this last work, marking it off from the other two major works. However, the firm determination of the poet not to compromise with the enemy is strongly maintained as reflected in the line 'rain or shine, how can one share the same sky with the enemy'. Chieu's vain hope for a miracle to restore order and peace to his country is also reflected in the conclusion of Nhĩp Môn's poem.

The image of Nhan Su, a silent presence in the background of the story who withdrew into his innerself while upholding virtue, represents Nguyên Đình Chieu himself. Nhăn Su blinded himself, an action of protest and a powerful sign of his refusal to submit. He became blind by choice to avoid the painful things which he hated to face:

I would rather face eternal darkness
Than see the faces of traitors.
I would rather see no man
Than encounter one man's suffering.
I would rather see nothing
Than witness the dismembering of the country in decline.
I would rather accept blindness
Than see killing on earth.
Being blind but knowing how to uphold family virtues
Is better than having eyes but neglecting one's ancestors.
Being blind but keeping one's honour intact and un tarnished
Is better than having eyes and accepting corruption.
Being blind but keeping one's body and mind intact
Is better than having eyes but having to cut hair and trim the beard.65

65 Ibid., pp. 466-467.
This speech shows the same upholding of Confucian beliefs which Chieu expressed in his earlier work Điòng Tứ Hà Mậu. In his opinion, people should keep their bodies unsullied out of respect for the ancestors who had given them life. The notion of respect has a further implication, that is, how people should show their respect. Traditionally, respect is shown by loyalty and upholding family honour.

The words of Nhăn Sà reconfirm Chieu's stand: 'In the face of a dark and dusty sky, it is better to be blind. To ease all itchings in the eyes and yet to be able to nourish an honest heart.' He remained an implacable foe of the French and their collaborators. It was impossible to force him to adopt the French life style or French ideology. Further it is recorded that Chieu avoided walking on paved roads, made by the French, forbade his children to study Quốc Ngữ, and boycotted French soap. Chieu even rejoiced in being blind. To him blindness was no longer a great misfortune, but almost a blessing. He was spared from seeing those things which he found unacceptable. 'To nourish an honest heart' was his only task.

AN EXEMPLARY CONFUCIAN

The deteriorating situation of Vietnam at the time of the extension of French control over Tonkin and Annam, put an end to all the hopes which had been expressed in Ngu Tiếu Văn Dập:

Whenever the sky and the earth are restored to their proper places.
Then we would gladly see the country free of Western wind.
...Whenever the sun and moon pour down their brightness,
The four seas would together sing the song of reunion.66

Until his death in 1888 Chieu dedicated his days to a pure and honest life true to his Confucian principles. He refused all offers from the French: It is recorded that in 1883 Michel Ponchon, the young

66  Ibid., p. 291.
French Resident of Bến Tre province, so admired the poet that he extended an invitation to him. As Chiếu gave no reply, Ponchon paid him an unexpected visit at his house. Through an interpreter Ponchon asked the poet for the copyright of Lục Văn Tiên. His request was granted. Ponchon returned on another occasion and offered to give back the land the poet had lost in Gia Định, while taking refuge in Cần Giuộc. It is reported that Chiếu laughed and said: 'You have taken the land of the King, why bother to return my land.' On a further occasion Ponchon offered the poet a pension, but again the offer was declined. The French Resident recorded the story in the following terms: 'he refused any award in cash by saying he had sufficient to sustain his life, and the honour which people attached to his name made him happy enough.' Pillet, an anthropologist in Bến Tre, wrote an article on the poet in 1883 which was published in the newspaper *Indépendant de Saigon*. The following is the response from the editorial staff:

We thank Mr Pillet and other persons for providing us with information on the popular Vietnamese author. We believe, we should act on behalf of the Vietnamese people to request the colonial government to provide for the maintenance of this unrecognised great man, by means of an allowance provided by the colony. We shall not be worthy of the civilization which we represent in Cochinchina if we allow such a famous old man to live in such a sickly and poor condition.

It seems that in French eyes Nguyễn Đình Chiều, the blind poet, was not regarded as an enemy or a dangerous person, but was admired for his good life and virtue. The French held Lục Văn Tiên, his masterpiece

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68 The article on Chiếu was originally appeared in *L'indépendant de Saigon*, No. 176 (November 1883). It was reproduced in Nam Kỳ (26 June 1943), and in *Sưu Túc Những Bài Báo*, p. 20.

69 This letter originally appeared in *L'Indépendant de Saigon*, No. 172 (November 8 1883). *Sưu Túc Những Bài Báo*, p. 23.
in high esteem and it was translated into French many times. The nature of French esteem was illustrated many years later in a speech read by Hoeffle, the French Governor, in front of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's tomb on the occasion of his anniversary in 1943. Addressing the young audience the Governor said:

...You should also improve yourself by reading Lưu Văn Tiến
like a morning prayer so that you know how to respect dignity,
how to value loyalty and filial piety, and how to esteem a hero's example.70

Taken as a whole, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's life was indeed one of virtue and high principle. His bitter criticism of the French, their ideology, their invasion, and of any Vietnamese who compromised national traditions, reflects his deep Confucian training. The very fact that he immediately left his examinations to go home to observe mourning, reveals how highly he placed Confucian principles above everything else. Confucianism, which guided his reactions, postulated the existence of only one life, that of the present, in which great values were the fulfillment of social obligations, and the improvement of human nature. He strove to make the only contribution of which he was capable in the struggle to restore the integrity of his country, of that/using his pen to stir others to action. He is deserving of special honour and esteem for his consistent attitude and his personal integrity during the stormy years of French colonial advance.

Moreover, Chiểu was an original poet, who in spite of his Chinese studies, did not follow classical themes. He developed a style suited to the situation of contemporary Vietnam and to the expression of his innermost feelings. He drew on folk tradition in composing his long poems but the plots of these poems contain strikingly original stories. The three phases of Chiểu's writings

70 For the whole speech, see Ibid., pp. 77-78.
vary in mood and style reflecting the changing circumstances of Vietnam. Before the French conquest he used poems to promote order and virtue and to maintain the Confucian state. At the time when Cochinchina was in a state of turmoil but there was still hope of ousting the French he expressed optimism in his violently anti-French poems. As the fire of resistance burned out, he withdrew into himself.

Chieu was an articulate and very talented spokesman for ethnic hostility to French invasion and domination. Through his emphasis on Confucianism he offered a rallying force for the Vietnamese — a spiritual rallying force which could be impregnable to material conflict.
CHAPTER V

NGUYỄN KHUYẾN (1835-1909)

A MANDARIN IN RETREAT
Nguyen Khuyen (1835-1909)

'Children, why do you remain sleeping unawares?'
The political intrigue and impending doom which faced the Nguyễn dynasty in the early 1880's marked an end to all the hopes of the concerned literati for a better future for Vietnam. In Cochinchina, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, sharing the pessimism of his fellow scholars, then viewed his blindness as something fortunate. Meanwhile in the North, talented men tried to withdraw from active participation in public life. In this way they could escape commitment, maintain their personal integrity and at the same time devote their literary talents to the service of the conquered country, by writing about social, ethical, and political problems. The best example illustrating this kind of withdrawal is to be found in Nguyễn Khuyên, who during his own life was renowned as a scholar, a mandarin, and a recluse poet. To him this whole chapter is devoted.

Nguyễn Khuyên was born into an educated family in 1835 at Yên Bái, a small village in Nam Định province. His grandfather had been a high ranking mandarin at Court in Huế during the Lê dynasty and his father was also of the literati-gentry. Looked at historically, the life of Nguyễn Khuyên can be divided into three periods: a period of poverty from 1835 to 1871; a period of success as a mandarin from 1871 to 1883; a period of retreat from 1884 to 1909. It is the final period of Nguyễn Khuyên's life which illustrates the response of negative patriotism (ái quốc tiêu cực) to the French challenge.

Khuyên showed literary talent from a very early age. When he was seventeen he sat the Tú Tài examination (at the same time as his father) but failed. Two years later his father died and his studies were

1 He was a Tiến Sĩ holder.

2 He was Nguyễn Khải (1796–1854) a village teacher who passed Tú Tài three times but could not pass any higher mandarinal examinations.

interrupted. He began teaching to earn his living and to support his mother. Moreover, he tried to keep up his studies. Fortunately he came to the notice of a wealthy scholar, Vu Van Ly, who was impressed by Khuyen's intelligence and so touched by his poverty that he offered him free board and education. Nguyen Khuyen happily accepted the offer. Many sources note that Nguyen Khuyen received lessons from another famous scholar named Pham Van Nghi who devoted a great deal of his time to tutoring. In 1864 Nguyen Khuyen passed the regional examination (thi huong) with top marks. In 1871 he passed both the metropolitan examination (thi hoi) and the palace examination (thi dinh). Again he came first both times. To commemorate his great success, Emperor Tu Duc himself wrote the two words Tam Nguyen on his celebration flag and banner. Henceforth he was known as Tam Nguyen of Yen Do. 'Tam Nguyen' meant that he had passed the three highest examinations of the Court at the top of the list in each examination, while 'Yen Do' was the name of his native village.

In 1872 Nguyen Khuyen began his mandarinal career. His first appointment was that of Director of Studies (hoc hoc) in Thanh Hoa Province. Three years later he became Judge (Bo Chanh) in Nghe An Province. In 1879 he was transferred to Hue to work as Grand Scholar (Truc Hoc St) at the National Academy (Quoc Tu Gim) and in 1883 he became Commercial Official (Bac Thanh Thuong Bien) with responsibility for dealing with foreign trade in Tonkin. A few months later he was appointed Governor (Tong Doc) of provinces Son Tay, Hung Hoa, and Tuyen Quang in the upper part of Tonkin. It was at the height of his mandarinal career in 1883 that Nguyen Khuyen decided to resign his office and return to his native village.

RESIGNATION AND WITHDRAWAL

The exact date of Nguyễn Khuyên's resignation was not recorded, but the line 'The king had died and I resigned'\(^5\), from his poem *The Story of a Farmer* (Mộc Gia Tự Thuật) makes it clear that he submitted his resignation after the death of Emperor Tự Đức. Poor sight was the only reason he could offer, though it is a matter of record that he put ginger in his eyes to make them look unhealthy. Thus, first impressions suggest he followed the convention that 'A loyal servitor will not serve two dynasties'. But the chaotic political situation in Vietnam following the death of Tự Đức, the power struggle within the court, and the Franco-Vietnamese Treaty of 1884 put Khuyên in a difficult position. For one thing, he did not believe that resistance leaders could become legitimate rulers of Vietnam. In his poem *Anxious to Get Married* (Gái Mong Chồng) he expressed the wish of Confucian scholars like himself to find a worthy ruler who would restore independence and legitimate rule\(^6\).

Nothing is more pitiful than a lonely girl
Dreaming the whole night through of finding herself a husband.
Impatiently she waits for the dragon-cloud meeting,
Anxiously she longs for a fish-water encounter.
Trying to look happy she sometimes forces herself to smile,
 Pretending to be stupid she often talks nonsense.
But having a husband is like possessing wings
With them a whole country can be lifted up like a feather.\(^7\)

In this poem Khuyên uses the image of a girl seeking a husband to portray his desire to serve a true king. His metaphor of the dragon is significant, the dragon being symbolic of a legitimate ruler. 'Dragon-cloud meeting' indicates an opportunity to exert

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\(^6\) Khuyên is following the literary convention, established by the Chinese poet Ch’u Yuan, of using the search of a girl for a husband as a metaphor for the Confucian scholar’s search for a true ruler.

one's talents to the full in the king's service, while 'a fish-water
encounter' indicates that a suitable environment exists in which to
do so. In addition, the Treaty of 1884 officially made Tonkin a
French protectorate. By accepting a post as Governor of Sơn Tây,
Hưng Hóa and Tuyên Quang provinces, Khuyên would have been
acknowledging the French as his ruler. This he could not do. He
therefore made a deliberate decision to resign on traditional moral
grounds, as many mandarins - Vietnamese as well as Chinese-had done
in the past. His withdrawal also helped him avoid participation in
the discredited government. Khuyên's refusal to serve can be viewed
as an honest expression of protest prompted by his Confucian ideals.

This point can be clarified by the following remark by Burton Watson:

For Confucians, reclusion was essentially a form of political
protest to be carried out when one felt that conditions in the
government were so unsavoury that there was no longer any
hope of reform and conscience forbade one to hold public office
or remain longer in the every day world.8

The poem entitled Song of My Good Native Place9 (Bùi Viễn Cưu
Trạch Ca), composed upon Khuyên's retirement, explicitly conveys
the author's intention of adopting a rustic, eremitical life as an
alternative:

Vùn Bùi, my good old home,
Here I end up through my own volition after forty years.10
Bamboo trees, chrysanthemums, cherry blossoms,
Hidden pleasures can be found in mountains, creeks, forests
and streams.
T'ao C'hien plays his stringless guitar and chants his old
verses.
On Cong happily spends his spring drinking wine.
I look back for the eastern wind, tears fill the handkerchief.

8 Burton Watson, Chinese Lyricism, NewYork, Columbia University
Press, 1971, p. 73.
9 Nguyễn Văn Tú, Thơ Văn Nguyễn Khuyên, p. 225.
10 Implies the period in which the poet lived outside his native
area owing to his education, training, and mandarinal career.
The immense space has faced many painful changes.
So, there should be no complaint,
My hair turns grey, what can I do?
Go back, yes, why not go back?

Even though the withdrawal was voluntary, the author did not try to hide his emotional disturbance and sorrow at events, which grew irreversible and drove him to return his seal of office. The last line 'go back, yes why not go back' by its repetition stresses Khuyên's determination to follow T'ao C'hien. The images of T'ao C'hien playing his stringless guitar and chanting his old verses and of On Cong passing his time drinking wine, brought out purposely by Khuyên in lines five and six, tell of his admiration and acknowledgement of their wise attitude. In fact, Khuyên chose them as his models during the period of his retirement.

T'ao C'hien\textsuperscript{11} is regarded by Chinese critics as the first great poet of t'ien-yen (fields and gardens), because much of his work deals with life in his farming village in Kiangsi. Similarly, Nguyễn Khuyên is often described by the Vietnamese critics as the poet of rustic life (Thi sì nông thôn). However, the crucial point is that Khuyên used poetry as an outlet for his inner-most feelings, including his firm refusal to serve, his patriotic concern over the loss of Vietnam's independence, contempt for a corrupt society and its people, appreciation of good friends, and thoughts on old age.

Khuyên's works, which consist of some two hundred poems in Chinese and a further hundred in Nếu, are compiled into a collection called Quê Sơn Thí Táp.\textsuperscript{12} Quê Sơn is Khuyên's pen name and is also the

\textsuperscript{11} T'ao C'hien or Tao Yuan-ming (365-427) was one of the greatest early Chinese poets whose eremitism is believed to have been motivated by loyalty to the Eastern Chia Dynasty.

name of a beautiful mountain near his village. "Quê Sơn Thificados as a diary in verse of a man who abandoned political life, but still grieved over the fate of his country and so tried to find solace and fulfilment in writing. Indeed, Khuyên's poems give an insight into his troubled mind which his eremitism alone cannot express.

Nguyễn Khuyên could have returned to political life, but each time the offer came he refused, giving either his age or his near blindness as an excuse. One story reveals that he was introduced to the French Resident in his palace in Hà-Nam: After having taken a good look at his gown and hat, the poet addressed himself to a pillar and gave it three bows. 'Hello, Sir' he said to the pillar. Everybody laughed. Khuyên claimed he had mistaken the pillar for the Resident. The only post which Khuyên forced himself to accept was as tutor from 1891 to 1893 to the children of Hoàng Cao Khải, Viceroy of Tonkin. This was not a political appointment and he might have felt that as tutor he could influence the coming generation to accept his Confucian ideals. After only two years he resigned.

On account of the poet's reputation and intelligence he was again offered official status by the Chief of Nam Định Province, Vũ Văn Bảo. This Province Chief was the son of his former tutor and benefactor, Vũ Văn Lý, from whom the poet had received valuable support as a young man. Nevertheless, Khuyên refused to return to his mandarinal occupation. On this occasion he expressed his feelings in The Words of the Widow (Lời Gái Góa) which clarified his stand on non-collaboration and reaffirmed his allegiance to his Confucian background:

13 Nguyễn Văn Tú, Thơ Văn Nguyễn Khuyên, p. 28.
He does not realise that I am a widow
Living in loneliness and in shortage of rice and clothes.
But there happens to be a thoughtful match-maker,
Who forces me into marriage with an exuberant youngster.
This robust youth can endure long fatigue,
This old widow unfortunately possesses no such strength,
How much I try, still I shall not be able to please him.
The match looks potential, it will certainly not last.
How many times have my parents told me that
A girl who chases men gathers nothing but contempt.
Oh madame match-maker! Why are you so thoughtful?
Your kindness is good but your ruse is bad.
If you are concerned about me, just lend me clothes and rice,
If you ask me to marry, being a widow, I shall beg you NO.14

In this poem Nguyễn Khuyên identifies himself with the widow
and in literary terms depicts the great similarity between her and
himself. First, the widow had lost her husband; Nguyễn Khuyên lost
his Emperor, Tự Đức, whom he had served and by whom he was
honoured when he received his title of Tam Nguyễn. Second, Nguyễn
Khuyên and the widow were both bound to the same Confucian ethics
which taught:

A virtuous wife must not have two husbands.
A loyal servitor must not serve two dynasties.

Brought up in this Confucian tradition, the widow could not bring
herself to remarry; in the same way Nguyễn Khuyên did not want to
serve another ruler - especially a French-controlled one. The
attitude of Khuyên and the widow/derived from their fear of being
laughed at and ostracised, if they broke with their traditions. So
their determination was strengthened by a desire to adhere to
familiar moral standards. Their need to uphold their moral code
at any cost explains why the widow had 'to beg' the match-maker
not to force her to remarry.

Equally, in the Words of the Widow, Nguyễn Khuyên showed his
concern over the contrast between French political power and his
own limited physical powers. He saw the French as being like a

14 Ibid., p. 91.
husband full of the vitality of youth with strength and lust, while he himself was more like a fragile woman past her prime. By this image he implied that the ideological difference between himself and the French conquerors was so great that even if he accepted a post from them he would be incapable of serving them.

In another poem called *Foolish Mother* (*Ngọ Mộc*), Nguyen Khuyen referred to Confucian traditions to explain his attitude towards keeping himself pure and unstained. This poem was based on the true story of a beautiful woman from the City of Nam Định whose husband disappeared. In order to keep her virtue and remain faithful to her lost husband she deliberately destroyed her beauty to drive other admirers away. In his appraisal of this woman Nguyen Khuyen wrote the following lines:

Physical appearance need not be beautiful
As long as the heart is kept pure as gold.
Clean as water, white as ivory, and clear as snow
The mirror of her virtue shines brilliantly and spotlessly.
She turns her deaf ear, she looks indifferent
Regardless of whether people say she is clever or foolish.
People's cleverness is easy to sell but this senselessness....

The poet left his sentence unfinished, but putting himself in the place of the woman he implied 'this senselessness is hard to find.' The lesson was that he had adopted the more difficult course, believing it is better to risk disparagement than to receive hollow praise for working for the French.

The same message is clearly conveyed in another poem *The Man Who Feigns Deafness* (*Anh Giỷ Siếc*). It is the story of a man who pretended to be deaf and who put on a 'wooden face when listening to the happy crowd'. In reality nothing passed his notice, he was 'clever, nimble like a monkey'.

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He roams in the rear garden, the front yard, smoking cigarettes, chewing betel nuts, drinking five to seven cups of good tea, and chanting a few verses from Kieu. 17

He listens eagerly one moment, then is deaf again.

Seemingly the poet used this man to describe himself. He might look foolish and eccentric to his contemporaries, but it was a deliberate act which he felt was justified. The way in which the poet ended his story emphasises his intention.

Who would not like to possess that type of deafness, but surely it is hard to be deaf that way. Ask him how, he just says 'pardon'.

REFLECTIONS ON THE KING AND MANDARIN OFFICIALS

Observation of the humiliating conditions faced by those who worked for the French strengthened Khuyen's resolution not to accept a political position. For even the King, who was traditionally regarded as the Son of Heaven and believed to be endowed with the power of life and death, became a mere puppet. The King's exalted position was lost as his subjects served him only in name, for in reality service to the King was service to the French. The mandarins' position was no better than that of the King. The termination of the Viceroy's function in Tonkin by the French in 1897 virtually placed all local Vietnamese mandarins under direct control of the French Resident Superior. The following part of the report by the French Governor General Doumer, on the power of the Resident Superior, gives a good picture of the general situation of Vietnam:

They ensure that the law, decrees, and criminal proceedings are carried out. They initiate measures in the general administration and police. They are in charge of maintaining public order and quelling armed resistance. They have the same powers as the prefects in France and in the same manner are vested with the utmost control of personnel of all services - the personnel of all local services is directly

17 Kieu was the masterpiece of Nguyen Du (1765-1820).
under their authority.\textsuperscript{18}

It was to avoid being forced into direct collaboration that Nguyễn Khuyên refused to take office. In his poem \textit{Words of a Chêo Actor's Wife} (Lời Vợ Phuông Chêo), he made a subtle plea to other mandarins to do the same.

In a village of the East, there lived a Chêo\textsuperscript{19} actor, Who woke his wife in the middle of the night for a talk. 'I often act as high mandarin;' he said, 'But why do you treat me like dirt?'

His wife was absolutely furious and poured scorn upon him: You're already old, how can you still be so foolish, Thank goodness it's night and nobody can hear you! Otherwise people would laugh at me For marrying such an imbecile as you.

Just remember, there are only two things to fear in life: To possess the power of life and death, and to experience this power held in other people's hands.

Unfortunately you cannot understand that, How can a nobody like you win respect? You have to act to earn your living. On stage a Chêo King counts for nothing. A Chêo mandarin with a painted face is no better than a clown!\textsuperscript{20}

Superficially the poem is just a simple story told in simple words, but for Nguyễn Khuyên the poem was a veiled attack on the royal family and the court mandarin as a whole. For the poet, the members of the Court were merely actors and clowns on a French stage. Although there is nothing wrong in being an actor in the Western world, in Vietnam at that time the actor class was almost excluded from respectable, Confucian society. The actor's service was not even formally graded in society and his role was held in little regard.\textsuperscript{21}

As a consequence of low rank, actors were not allowed to enter the

\textsuperscript{18} Paul Doumer, \textit{Situation de l'Indochine} (1897-1901) Hà Nội, Imprimeur-éditeur, 1902, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{19} Chêo is a kind of theatrical act to depict historical episodes in which the kings and mandarins usually made their appearance.

\textsuperscript{20} Nguyễn Văn Tú, \textit{Thọ Văn Nguyễn Khuyên}, p. 98.

\textsuperscript{21} A Vietnamese saying that entertainers and actors are worthless (Xướng ca vô loài) well illustrates how they were regarded.
competitive examinations which led to an official career. Vietnamese law even forbade them to marry the sons and daughters of upper class families. Such was the status of the actor in traditional Vietnamese society. The very fact that Nguyễn Khuyến compared the King and mandarins of his time with Chèo actors was a very bitter metaphor. It seems that the poet wanted to put them at the very bottom of society.

Furthermore, in Nguyễn Khuyến’s poem the woman represents common sense and behaves with a sense of dignity, in contrast to the Chèo King. This was a great insult to the Court. Traditionally a woman was not supposed to express her opinion. She was expected to obey her husband without question in all circumstances. But in this poem the woman did a lot of talking. She even dared to scold her husband; not only once, but over and over again (mắng đi mắng lại). The line ‘His wife was absolutely furious and poured scorn upon him’ is particularly strongly phrased. It represented a major affront to the dignity of the Court. The poet used the last statement of the woman:

Off stage a Chèo King counts for nothing.
A Chèo mandarin with a painted face is no different from a clown.

to bring the King and his mandarins down to earth, to the sad fact that not just the poet but everybody, even a woman, a person of no status, realised the true status of the Court. Only the King and his mandarins were too blind to recognise their true situation. Possibly they did even realise that the power of life and death over them was in the hands of others, that is to say, in French hands.

Of the high ranking mandarins, Khuyến particularly attacked Nguyễn Hữu Độ, the most ardent collaborator of the time. Độ succeeded Hoàng Diệu to the governorship of Hà Nội and in 1885...
the French entrusted him with the position of Head of the Privy Council, replacing Nguyễn Văn Thưởng. He then became one of the most influential men during the reign of puppet King Đồng Khánh and for some years thereafter. But his most concrete service to the French lay in his ardent quelling of armed resistance in Tonkin, and his great effort to ease the task of the French administrators. For example, the French Resident, Bonnal, describes how in 1883 when Monseigneur Puginier wished to build a cathedral on the site where an ancient pagoda already existed, the French authorities, reluctant to seize the land, passed the task to Đỗ. He succeeded in having the pagoda condemned as unsafe by the local Vietnamese authorities, who happened to be Christians. It was pulled down and the land was given free of charge to the Catholic Mission who built the cathedral. To acknowledge his 'good' services, the Nguyễn Court, with the consent of the French authorities, granted him the title 'Duke of Tống Sơn district' (Tống Quân Công) and nominated him to the position as Viceroy of Tonkin. Resident Bonnal even ordered the construction of a palace for Đỗ in the Examination Camp (Trường Thi). Moreover, Đỗ was allowed to build a temple to himself. His Temple to a Living Man (Mịchu Sinh Tù) was an unprecedented phenomenon. For Nguyễn Khuyên it provided a source of inspiration for the composition of a poem entitled Feelings and Impressions on Passing By the Temple to Living Nguyễn Hữu Đỗ (Quả Quân Công Hữu Đỗ Sinh Tù Hữu Cam) 22

How glorious is the appearance of the temple!
Which is for the worship of the Duke of Tống Sơn.
The whole year round, being alive, he busily receives men in caps and gowns. 23

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22 Nguyễn Văn Tù, Thổ Vần Nguyễn Khuyên, p. 346.
23 Indicate mandarinal status.
Who are happy to bow in attendance and terribly sad if unable. With the Duke gone, there will be no more gatherings. The incense burners will become cold and the grass will grow wild.

Only the 'second class citizens without name', bending their sticks, walk in and out by night. Such is life with its ups and downs. But when he lives in Hell, whom will he follow?

In this poem Nguyễn Khuyên cleverly criticized Nguyễn Hữu Độ for encouraging in his subordinates a syncopistic attitude. They did not really respect him, but because of his influence with the French, they hoped he would further them in their own careers. After he was dead however, the poet felt certain that they would forget him, since during his lifetime, only beggars came to his temple in his absence.

A further poem, written after Nguyễn Hữu Độ's death, shows that he was indeed forgotten by his subservient subordinates. Even the common people, whose respect he had sought to gain, left his temple totally deserted.

What a great pity. Life is hard and earnest, now in front of your Temple of withering bamboos not even one is still bending.

Đạo's fate - the fate of a collaborator - was to receive honour neither from the French nor from his own countrymen, as Nguyễn Khuyên describes with the metaphor of the temple of withering bamboos, symbols of neglect and absence of lasting honour.

The French attitude to their servitors was to exploit them to the full while they lived, but forget them immediately after they died. This situation is in complete contrast with the traditional Vietnamese attitude to those who served the state well, to whom temples or shrines were raised after their death.

24 Indicate beggars.

25 For the complete poem see Nguyễn Văn Tư, Thơ Văn Nguyễn Khuyên, p. 345.
Nguyễn Khuyên also launched discrete criticism of Hoàng Cao Khải (1850-1933), who was originally trained as a Confucian scholar but became an ardent collaborator of the French, and was later made Viceroy of French-controlled Tonkin. As Viceroy, Khải called upon the leading resistance leader, Phan Đăng Phùng, to submit to the French. It angered Khuyên that men like Khải, instead of serving the interests of the Vietnamese people, could work for the French and ignore the tragedy of the country. The poem The Stone Figure (Ông Phong Bâ), was written impromptu on Khải's birthday celebration at the Viceroy Palace, where Khuyên worked as a tutor at the time. It reflects the bitter feelings of Khuyên about the indifferent attitude of Khải to the fate of Vietnam:

> What are you standing there for, dear Sir,  
> Hard as rock and solid as copper?  
> Whom do you guard by day and by night.  
> The country is in chaos, do you know?  

The Chief of Nam Định Province, Vũ Văn Bảo, was only a reluctant collaborator, but he had asked Nguyễn Khuyên to return to government service. He incurred Khuyên’s criticism because he went on a mission to France to represent Vietnam at the Paris exposition in 1889. Khuyên was at the party given by the Chief upon his return, and received the latter’s photograph in official robes taken in Paris. He thanked him in the following lines:

> In August, upon your return home after finishing your mission,  
> During a party you gave me your photograph.  
> The gorgeous [official] gown and girdle were taken cleverly,  
> [But] your patriotic and concerned mind, it was difficult to show.  
> Your youthful hair has changed (tụy) with the frost and snow,  
> [It is] a beauty transported from the far-away land.
Luckily I have my photograph in addition to yours:
To hang on the wall so that the younger generation can admire.\(^{28}\)

Lines three and four imply that the Chief lacked patriotism. The
image of hair changing to resemble snow is used conventionally to
show that a person looks old through the cares of office, but the
use of the word \(tuy\) indicates a double meaning, that the Province
Chief is following French ways, since frost and snow are associated
with Northern countries rather than with Vietnam. The final two
lines ironically convey Nguyễn Khuyên's belief that later generations
will distinguish who was correct - Nguyễn Khuyên in his retirement,
or the Province Chief in his collaboration.

OUTLOOK ON SCHOLASTIC AND SOCIAL DECAY

Nguyễn Khuyên held a similar attitude of contempt and sarcasm
towards those Vietnamese scholars who took degrees and titles awarded
by the French. His criticism was based on their shallow knowledge
of the Chinese classics, their lack of traditional scholastic values,
and their blind co-operation with the French. Having been brought
up and trained in Confucian ways, Khuyên found it hard to accept the
new system of education introduced by the French, the so-called
reformed program which included three new subjects: Romanized
Vietnamese (Quốc Ngữ), French, and mathematics. The reason is that
Khuyên believed in the great importance of Chinese Classics; they
are the fountain-head of Confucian scholarship and hence of
collective and individual morality. To express his disapproval and
contempt, Nguyễn Khuyên wrote The Holder of a Paper Doctorate\(^{29}\) (Ông
Tiền Sĩ Giấy):

\(^{28}\) Láng Nhân, Giao Thọi Láng Nho, p. 466.

\(^{29}\) Võ Thu Tính, Cao Tác Giả Thọ Kỷ XIX và XX, p. 272. Nguyễn
Văn Tú, Thơ Văn Nguyễn Khuyên, p. 97.
The craftsmen certainly possess many-sided trickery,
They disturb this old man but succeed in attracting the young kids.
With such a painted face and trimmed beard, you look glorious in the country.

[But] How many cents are those papers of yours worth, damned people?
You sell your name in order to buy fame,
Your gold banner and stone stele last forever.
I want to ask anyone who wants his children to be like that,
Look back into your past to see whether you and your many generations of ancestors successfully acquired religious attainment.

In the first three lines of the poem, Khuyên portrayed the French as tricky craftsmen who knew how to trim the beards and paint the faces of their paper toys, namely their chosen people. In other words, the French handed to the Vietnamese, degrees and titles to make them appear qualified and to impress the public. The rest of the poem criticized the aims and the background of people who were willing to seek scholastic honours under the French system, as Nguyễn Khuyên implied that not only were such people culpable for their own aims, but also that their forebears were to blame for failing to attain spiritual enlightenment under the old system and pass on the heritage of the Confucianism to their children.

The poet expressed the same feelings again in another poem entitled *The Doctorate Holder of the Eighth Lunar Month* (Ông Nghệ Thang Tâm)\(^{30}\). This time he likened the recipients of French degrees and titles to the paper figures made for children to play with during the Autumn Lunar Festival\(^{31}\) (Lunar Trung Thu).


\(^{31}\) Often while buying toys for their children, parents choose a doll which has the appearance of a degree holder sitting gloriously on a chair with flags and banners on both sides. In doing this, the parents seek to give their children an idea of what it is like to be the holder of a high degree. Indirectly, they express their wish to have their children attain that distinction.
You are presented with flags, banners, cap and gown. You are also called a holder of the top degree. A piece of paper serves to attach your name to the list of highly learned. A few dots of red ink turn you into one of the top graduates. How come, with all these fancy clothes, you remain such a light-weight? Why is the value of your scholastic reputation so low? On the high sofa, under the blue canopy, you sit proudly, making people believe you are real, but I see you are only a toy.

The four last lines provide clearer explanations of the poet's contempt for the scholars who gained degrees under the new French system which he regarded as farcical. For Khuyên there was no difference in appearance between the scholars of the past and of the present. The difference between them was one of spirit. The new scholars certainly lacked both the training and the wisdom of the traditional scholars. That was one reason why Khuyên believed they deserved to be called 'cheap light-weights'. But undeniably, Khuyên felt disturbed and resentful because of their willingness to become a 'toy' of the French.

Khuyên drew attention to further problems which his society had to face. These were corruption among government officials, the erosion of good traditions among people of every class, and the insulting behaviour of the powerful French. Holding to the ideal that the scholar should set an example of virtue and righteousness for common people to follow, Nguyễn Khuyên despised corrupt officials. He used as an example the Director of Studies in Hà Nam Province, Trần Tân Bỉnh, who accepted bribery from the students but, nevertheless, failed some of them. He could not resist sending the Director of Studies the following poem:

Someone said that you were both foolish and simple. You are simple, but how, nevertheless, can you manage to obtain so much money?
You take advantage of your Tien Si of second class. You rob the poor student his three dollars. You care only about lining your pockets, Regardless of the curses which people heap on you.

To Khuyên, the deterioration in Confucian morals was not restricted to the mandarin class. It had spread from the intellectuals to the common people, leading to many odd and immoral practices. He gave us some typical examples of what he saw. One was that of a tutor who tried to woo the widowed mother of his student. In this story, the tutor confessed to his student during the teaching period:

People say that I love you,
In fact I love your mother, but no one knows.

The mother of the student was in traditional terms even worse than the tutor, since Confucianism demanded stricter sexual morality from women than from men. For Nguyễn Khuyên this story graphically illustrated the moral decay of his society. The people no longer felt bound by their traditions, they even went out of their way to break them. The words used by the poet in quoting the tutor reflected both the tutor's educational deficiency and his lack of moral fibre. At the same time, the attitude of the widowed mother who encouraged the tutor reflected a similar lack of morality. The principle was forsaken whereby a mother sacrificed her own happiness by remaining a widow for the good of her son. Here,

32 Traditionally, in order to be appointed to the post of Director of Studies for a province, a person should have Tien Si degree.

33 Three dollars is the translation of Tam Nguyễn which had a value equal to the cost of a big bag of rice during the poet's period. Tam Nguyễn is also a term applicable to a person who passed all three mandarin examinations with top marks in each examination. Here, the poet had both meanings in mind.

34 Nguyễn Văn Tú, Thơ Võ Nguyễn Khuyên, p. 114.

there was a new type of widow who ignored public criticism.

Nguyễn Khuyên's idealistic and harsh moral standards are reflected in many other poems composed for the purpose of portraying changes in social principles, ethics, and behaviour in Vietnamese society under French influence. An example is his short poem *The Scholar Who was Cheated by a Girl* (*Chê bắc dở mạc là gai*).\(^{36}\)

This is about a scholar who was so madly in love with a vagabond girl that he let her spend all his money. One day she ran away from him, leaving the scholar to taste loneliness and bitterness and to grieve over the loss of his money. Khuyên's intention, when portraying the tutor and the scholar, is to bring out explicitly the deterioration in the literati class in a time of chaos. They even neglected the basic duty of self improvement (*tu thân*), apart from other responsibilities expected in a scholar.

For Nguyễn Khuyên, even old women behaved improperly. They demanded love like fresh young girls. He used the exaggerated image of an old woman seeking a young husband to show the general decay of social customs:

**Phú Hacja**\(^{37}\)

An old woman of seventy-four
Sitting by the window writing letters to find a husband,
Being born one of the fair sex,
Seventy-four – not old at all.
She is in her prime, her teeth are falling out.
Days and nights pass, she warmly sends out love letters.
With luck she can catch a young husband
So as to be able to produce a little bit.\(^{38}\)

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\(^{36}\) For the complete poem see Nguyễn Xuân Hiệu, *Khảo Lục Về Nguyễn Khuyên*, pp. 167-168.


\(^{38}\) A little bit is the translation of *Chút nào*. It can imply a little baby or the glandular secretion the woman produces while having sexual relationship. It seems that the poet meant both.
Khuyên sought to make the old woman appear foolish for adopting the 'new' attitude. But even Khuyên noted that she herself did not feel anything wrong or foolish in her actions; on the contrary, she felt justified. In traditional society it was important to have a son to perpetuate the family name, so it followed that to marry and then to have a child was the sacred duty of a woman. The old woman thus had to fulfil her duty regardless of the laughs and jokes the public gave her. But the irony is she is too old to have the child that would justify her actions in seeking a husband.  

It is important to note that some of Nguyễn Khuyên's poems on the morals of the Vietnamese in the colonial period can be interpreted not only at the literal level as comments on the behaviour of his compatriots, but also in a metaphorical way as a general comment on the degeneration of the traditional society which sought a compromise with the ways of the French. Accordingly, the old woman in Phú Địa may be seen as representing the traditional society which debased itself by striving to adapt to the new order imposed by the French invaders. Similarly, the poem The Prostitutes of Cầu Nôm (Cầu Nôm) represents both the moral decline of individuals and the break down and degradation of the traditional order.

Prostitutes travelled far and wide;  
They gathered fame throughout the land.  
Some prostitutes would only accept high mandarins  
And when they died their funeral oration was sung and written in Nôm.

39 The woman got the idea from the social code Bất hiệu hữu tam vở hữu vi đại (having no child is the most serious of the three crimes which are committed due to the lack of filial piety).

40 For the complete poem see Nguyễn Văn Tú, Thơ Văn Nguyễn Khuyên, pp. 115-116.
Never before had prostitutes received such high prestige...41

The poet based his poem on the life story of a particular Courtesan named Từ Hồng, who lived in the second half of the 19th century. She also ran a business which undertook the demolition of the citadel of Hà Nội for the French. She had reached the height of wealth and prestige through her friendship and relationship with French officials and Vietnamese mandarins. In the end she married a Frenchman, who was an ex-missionary, and became respectable. Being very rich, she was able to give some of her money to flood aid and because of this, the Court of Huế granted her the title, Lady of the fourth rank (Từ Phạm Cung Nhân). Even her father was granted a title. From then on she put an altar in front of her house each time the King paid a visit to her area, by which to show her respect and loyalty to him.

As the story reveals, Miss Từ Hồng was in reality a courtesan but the poet treated her as no more than an ordinary prostitute. This reflected not only his utter disapproval of the generous treatment accorded this kind of woman, but also the change of social values in the latter period of his life. The way in which the poet ended his poem, 'God damned the prostitutes of Cầu Nôm', implies also the curse he placed on the authorities, Vietnamese as well as French, for encouraging prostitution. They seemed not only to protect prostitution but also to encourage its acceptance.

Once the Vietnamese women had begun to prostitute themselves

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41 Cầu Nôm is part of Đại Đông village in Hải Dương province. Cầu Nôm lies along the National Route 5 which connects Hà Nội and Hải Phòng. This is the area where people were famous for copper wares. They sold their copper objects throughout the country, then bought back the scrap to use again in new objects. Nguyễn Khuyên used the term Cầu Nôm in his poem to indicate that the prostitutes were like those scraps. In other words the prostitutes practiced their prostitution elsewhere, but in the end had to go back to their villages as these scraps.
to the French, they did not hesitate to marry Frenchmen if they had an offer. Often the main reason for mixed marriage was material gain, but the poet did not concentrate on this aspect. To him the girls were 'determined to engage bravely in battle' with French officers; in other words, they wanted to secure sensational sexual pleasure from Frenchmen. These aspects of love which existed between the Frenchmen and Vietnamese women, which the poet described in his poem *Getting Married to the French* (Lấy Tây)\(^2\), would be regarded as common place in the Western world, but unheard of in traditional Vietnamese society. Marriages were arranged and Vietnamese girls were expected to marry the men decided upon and introduced by their parents. There was no such thing as 'falling in love'. The tradition of securing a male heir was the primary reason for her having sexual relations with her husband. Whether in the process she obtained any satisfaction was unimportant. Women had no claim to sexual pleasure; that explains the word 'battle' translated from the term 'aũ chién' which the poet used to convey the promiscuity of the relationship between Frenchmen and Vietnamese girls, as opposed to the formality and correctness of traditional marriages.

*How bitter the men of these troubled days feel.*
*How well-schooled the girls of the new generation are!*

By this conclusion, Khuyên expressed his sympathy for Vietnamese men who lost their women to the French. However, the word 'well-schooled', is a translation of *ngoạn*. Traditionally *ngoạn* was used to describe good, proper girls who knew how to obey their parents and listen to their teachers, and who did not go out with men, but stayed at home to do the housework.

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\(^2\) Nguyễn Văn Tư, Thơ Văn Nguyễn Khuyên, p. 115.
Above are some unpleasant features which Nguyễn Khuyên purposely brought out to confirm his belief that Vietnamese society under French protection was in a completely demoralised state. The French had claimed to bring new light, civilization, and modernization to their conquered land. In actual fact, the conquest had the opposite effect. In Khuyên’s eyes, the French succeeded in manipulating almost the whole population, ranging from the ruling class to the common people, to destroy traditional Confucian customs. Instead of placing his charge on the French, Nguyễn Khuyên laid the responsibility squarely on his own people, who were blind to French strategy. His poem *A French Festival* (*Hội Tây*) is significant for the insight it gives into the poet’s mind and soul.

There the Peace Festival was booming with fire crackers and packed with floating flags and hanging lanterns. Sitting with legs apart, a mandarin’s wife watches the rowing race, bending down, a child catches a glimpse of a Chèo actor, full of energy, a group of women vigorously sway on a swing. Greedy for money, men compete in climbing the greasy poles. Congratulations to the inventors of such jolly games. The greater the joy, the bigger the disgrace.63

Apart from presenting a vivid picture of his people during the so-called Bastille Day Celebration organized by the French in Vietnam each year, Nguyễn Khuyên revealed his sadness and feeling of uneasiness arising from the degradation of his compatriots. People of all classes and of all ages were eagerly participating in the activities created by the French, but Khuyên alone sensed the disdain and lack of respect which the French had for those they administered when providing games such as swinging, climbing a greasy pole to take a coin from the top, or

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licking coins out of a frying pan. To the participants these games were good fun, but to an earnest and stern Confucian like the poet, they were uncivilized and undignified activities which stood in total contrast with the civilized entertainments, such as a banquet followed by a ball, which the French organized for their own people living on Vietnamese soil.

Equally, in a subtle manner Khuyên tackled the French; he used the word 'peace' (thằng bình) to describe the malice of the French, who on the one hand glorified peace, democracy, and freedom, the ideals of the 14th July Celebration, but on the other hand were making war in Vietnam and trying hard to subjugate the Vietnamese. Most importantly, the poet viewed the 14th July Celebration as a sign of the extent of foreign intrusion, because the loss of Vietnam enabled the French to celebrate their alien festival in his country. In Khuyên's view, if the Vietnamese had had a national consciousness, they would have avoided full participation in the activities introduced by the French. Their irresponsible attitude towards the loss of their country helped make the French festival so lively and successful. Only the poet was aware of the disgrace of his own people as citizens of a subject country.

INNER FEELINGS AND CONFLICTS

So far Nguyễn Khuyên gives the impression of being a feudal remnant who desired to see the restoration of the old order, and at the same time, he was capable of recognizing French responsibility for the chaotic state of his country and for the deterioration in his society and its quality of life. It is apparent that this knowledge influenced his state of mind, despite his complete withdrawal to the countryside where he led the life of a farmer fully participating in village activities. For although his intention was to remove himself completely
from the political arena, he was unable to become fully detached.

Signs of pessimism creep into his poetry, and the following poem, *New Year Advice to Children* (Ngay Xuân Rán Con Cháu), serves as one example:

Years pass only to add more grey hairs to my head and beard,
Now I have already turned fifty-three.
Books are of no use at this time,
Hoods and gowns only make this old man more shameful.
Spring comes round, troubled days still linger,
Man facing impasse, falls down stunned.
How can I offer my service successfully,
Children, why do you remain sleeping unawares?"44

This poem contains more than the poet's desolate call for awakening to sensibility from the young generation as suggested by the title. It voices strongly the bitterness and the weakness felt by the poet at the age of fifty-three, only three years after his resignation. It was true that the poet's books, signs of high learning, and gowns and hoods, signs of elevated mandarinal status, could not help him solve his country's problem. Nor could his individual eremitism serve as an example to his people. The old ideal had vanished of passing a mandarin's examinations and then serving the nation, an ideal once cherished by all men. The poet deeply regretted this loss. More than ever before he felt the burden of education which only made him sensitive to the evils of society which he was powerless to remedy. As it was, he could only feel dismayed.

In *Self Caricature* (Tụ Trào), Nguyễn Khuyên used the literary vehicle of irony to make an indirect attack on the government - those in power whose actions only made the situation worse:

I am neither rich nor noble,
I am neither thin nor fat, only a bit eccentric.
The game of chess is half over, I cannot find a move,

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The gambling continues but I ran away.
Opening my mouth I talk nonsense,
Softening my lips I drink like mad.
Thinking I can only detest myself,
How ironic that I should have received the blue stele and gold banner.\textsuperscript{45}

The tone of this poem is not as serious as New Year Advice to Children and the poet seems to be poking fun at himself, accepting once again his own weakness and irresponsibility since he ran away like a coward who dared not face difficulties. However, when he refers to the political scene of Vietnam as a game of chess or gambling, he implies that politics have degenerated into factional quarrels or a mere game of chance. By retiring, he feels he has proven himself superior to those who remain in the government.

In the sixteen line poem The Stone Figures (Ông Phòng Đà), Nguyễn Khuyên revived the image of the stone garden figure, but this time to criticise himself:

Where do you come from and what is your name?
Why do you look so odd.
With arms outstretched you look up into the sky,
To find a solution to the world’s problems....
Why bother with things with which one needs not bother at all,
Let the young generations handle the universe.
Here is a cup of wine for you, for him, then for me, then for you again.
Let’s get drunk, and sober, and drunk again, then make a few verses.
Yes or no, the stone figures know nothing but nod just the same.\textsuperscript{46}

By using the device of making one stone figure talk to the others, he included other scholars of his generation in his condemnation of his own inactivity. They all were as immovable in the face of difficulties as if they were made of stone and could only turn their backs on current problems, seeking personal consolation in drinking and writing.

\textsuperscript{45} Nguyễn Văn Tú, Thơ Văn Nguyễn Khuyên, pp. 85-86. Võ Thu Tịnh, Cả Tác giả..., p. 267.

\textsuperscript{46} Nguyễn Văn Tú, Thơ Văn Nguyễn Khuyên, pp. 89-90, Nguyễn Xuân Hiếu, Khảo Luận Về Nguyễn Khuyên, p. 148.
Drinking wine is a subject occurring a number of times in the poetry of Nguyễn Khuyên. But the motive was his desire to forget his intellectual sadness and to relax and sleep:

You and I, we should get drunk
To lessen the burden and alleviate earthly cares.\(^{47}\)

The poet’s strong desire to find in wine an unfailing cure for his persistent care and concern for his country is well reflected in the two ending lines of his poem Talking of The Past (Thọai Cười):

Would that we had the Middle Mountain Wine to drink
So as to sleep a long, long sleep until peace comes.\(^{48}\)

This is an allusion to the Chinese story of Liu Hsuan-shih who attained a cup of immortal wine from Middle Mountain which made him drunk for one thousand days. His family thought him dead and buried him, but when they were told he was only sleeping they opened his tomb and found he had sobered up. In this poem, Nguyễn Khuyên wished that he could sleep like Liu Hsuan-shi, until Vietnam again achieved the peace for which he hoped.

However, his belief in the impossibility of changing the predestined situation became clear in his poem Impromptu Inspirations (Ngưu Hằng) in which he admitted:

Thinking of life bores me to death,
Even with great effort there is no way to overcome Fate.
The greater knowledge, the bigger mistakes I make,
I bear the responsibility but gain nothing in return.
To win and then to lose, or to lose then to win results in a half-empty bottle.
Goodness and badness, compliment and insult, all are mere transitory smiles.
Leaning against the cushion by the window I want to turn into a butterfly.
The cold Autumn wind blows the Ngô leaves down.\(^{49}\)

\(^{47}\) From poem A Visit to Southern Mountain (Chỗi núi Nam Sơn) Nguyễn Xuân Hiếu, Khoài Luyến và Nguyễn Khuyên, p. 185.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., p. 150, Nguyễn Văn Tứ, Thơ Vọn Nguyễn Khuyện, p. 369.

\(^{49}\) Nguyễn Văn Tứ, Thơ Vọn Nguyễn Khuyện, p. 146.
In this poem, in a tone of bitter pessimism Nguyễn Khuyên re-admitted that, despite his training in Confucian morals, he was powerless to help the country. His learning was only a burden to him, since it made him feel responsible for the situation of Vietnam but did not suggest any positive action to solve the country's problems. He therefore wished that he could cast aside this burden of learning and become a butterfly, who lived a mindless and irresponsible existence.

The same theme of the burden of responsibility reappears in the poem *Spring Inspirations* (*Xuân Nhột Hội Cảm*), composed when Khuyên was sixty-five. His depth of sorrow and disillusion led him to wish for death, as a way out of his care, but he feared that he would be unable to face his ancestors after death because of his lack of achievement.

For over sixteen years I have dwelled in this farming land, however I grow sadder and sadder at the very thought of past events.
My traditional education is wasted, what is the point in living.
Old age is followed by sickness, it is right to die.
The persistence of rain and wind make believe Heaven shut his eyes,
Ever-green trees, and chrysanthemums wither, concerned scholars collapse.
Lucky that I am an ex-mandarin and so am excused from wearing the tax clearance tag.
One thing left I can tell to my ancestors when I join them in the underworld.50

Feeling bored with life and failing to cultivate within himself a totally indifferent heart, Nguyễn Khuyên gave himself over to sadness and gloom, which pervaded his whole being and were expressed in most of his landscape poems. We sense the poet is no longer interested in describing the natural world as it exists in reality, but only in extracting from it elements that serve as symbols for

his ideas and emotions. We have the impression that the poet visualised the French rule in his country as a veil of darkness which covered him wherever he happened to be or whatever he saw.

Some example of what he wrote at this time is:

Old, senile, and forelorn, here I am. 
The far-away village stretches away miserably, 
The old pagoda lies hidden among rocks and trees 
The aging monk rests between the smoke and cloud.51

Besides the dismal mood of the scenery, Nguyễn Khuyên used the image of 'an aging monk resting between the smoke and cloud' to reveal that he had only half-succeeded in attaining transcendedence, since 'smoke' is the Buddhist symbol of impurity of the world, while 'cloud', because of its aloofness and freedom of movement, serves as a symbol of purity and detachment of mind.

Although Khuyên remained essentially Confucianist in outlook, in later life he was influenced a bit by Buddhist and Taoist principles, as evidenced especially in his landscape poems, which employ Buddhist and Taoist symbolism and reveal notions of simplicity in living and involvement in Nature. A striving for simplicity is also shown in the directions he gave to his children concerning his funeral and rites after death, asking that there be no offerings or services.52 Nevertheless, Khuyên never discussed his belief in Buddhism, nor did he mention its effects on his life, though his poetry conveys hints of its influence on his thinking.

Part of the poet's description of A Spring Day in the poem of that title reads as follows:53

51 Ibid., p. 102.
52 See poem The Will (Di Chúc Văn) Ibid., pp. 418-421.
53 Ibid., p. 283.
Morning broke, the young bamboo trees quietly shed their dew as if crying.\(^{54}\)
Night came, the one crane cried out as if not knowing where to go.

The deserted shrine became a lonely shadow against the sky.
The stele of the good old days exposed to the changes of life.\(^ {55}\)
The poet's description of nature is conventional, but the message is clear and forceful. He failed to find in nature a cure for his distressed state of mind.

The loneliness, the emptiness, and the sadness which the poet felt could in fact be explained by his inability to find some friend with whom to share his heart's burden. He himself admitted:

\[
\text{How can I lessen my load of sadness} \\
\text{This situation makes my whole heart ache.} \quad ^{56}
\]

For instance, in the poem *An Excursion on the Lake Tây* (Đạo Hồ Tây):

Having a half-full bottle, I long to share it with a close friend. Whom should I ask to sing to the quiet Spring?\(^ {57}\)

His poem *Mourning Dương Khuê* (Khóc Dương Khuê) illustrates Khuyên’s deep grief over the passing away of his best friend, Dương Khuê. Here is part of it:

\[
\text{Without you I have no taste for delicious wines,} \\
\text{It goes unbought, not because of the lack of money.} \\
\text{I feel hesitant to write poetry,} \\
\text{As who will read it, who knows how to read it.} \quad ^{58}
\]

The poet's whole melancholic state of mind is beautifully brought out in what was perhaps his best poem, entitled *Inspired by the Cries of*
the Patria Bird (Quốc Kẻu Cẩm Hùng). This poem gives a clear explanation of his acute sadness.

Persistently and pathetically he raises his cries.
It is the return of Tu Yu who passed away long ago.
The whole night, Summer through, he pours out his blood,
With the waning moon his soul dissolves.
Is it because he misses Spring,
Or is it because he dreams of his country?
For whom is he calling continuously?
How deeply this wanderer feels.\textsuperscript{59}

In this poem the poet identified himself with the cuckoo, called in Vietnamese, Quốc which also means 'country or state'. The cuckoo was believed to be the soul of Tu Yu, the prince of Shu who, when alive, placed his state in the hands of his chief minister and went to another place. The cuckoo hence possesses a pathetic cry, which sounds like 'it would be best to return to my own country'. Khuyên lays great stress on this mournful cry by use of strong adjectives to express his depth of feeling and identification with the cuckoo and Vietnam. The poet's interpretation of the cuckoo's lament in lines five and six also implies that the cuckoo longed for the spring in the same way that Nguyễn Khuyên wished for a restoration of the idealised and glorious past of his country.

As a whole, this poem reflects the patriotism Khuyên held for his country although it was in French hands. In fact this kind of passive and discrete patriotism stayed with Nguyễn Khuyên until he died.

EVALUATION

Nguyễn Khuyên was essentially a product of Confucianism. Emperor Tự Đức wrote of him while he served as a Grand Scholar at the royal Court:

His virtue and loyal service are forever acknowledged.

He is reckoned as a pious son and a loyal subject. Even in later life Nguyễn Khuyên set a good example as a top calibre mandarin

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 120-121. Võ Thu Tĩnh, \textit{Các Tác Giả}, p. 264.
in retreat by leading a virtuous and simple life untouched by French materialism.

Nguyễn Khuyên’s withdrawal from a high position to a private life of hardship in the countryside, apart from being a great sacrifice, demonstrated his rejection of the unsavoury conditions caused by French domination. His repeated refusals to serve, after his resignation, did not mean that he possessed less desire than others to achieve fame, honour, and a comfortable life. His attitude reveals that he had a clear perception of the extent of the compromise that office holding during direct French rule would demand. This also explains why Khuyên bitterly criticised the King, the Court, and the scholar-officials who placidly accepted emolument and, at the expense of their integrity, shamelessly took jobs with the enemy. Nguyễn Khuyên proved himself more than sensitive to ethical matters because he still observed the tradition that a scholar like himself should be like a parent of the people and so should observe their behaviour and conduct. Moreover, the poet desired to see the people observe the same moral standards by which he lived. His criticism of the French, their puppets, and Vietnamese society’s response to the challenge of French culture was not excessively bitter and cruel like that of other poets of his time such as Nguyễn Đình Chiểu and Tù Xúong. The explanation is that, while on the one hand the poet utilised moderate criticism, on the other hand he sought to rouse a sense of dignity, patriotism, and responsibility in his people. This two-fold approach reflects his constructive attitude. Đặng Quảng Hãn made the following remark about Khuyên:

He was an experienced man, gifted with a tremendous talent in Nôm writing. He liked to poke fun at people, criticised them in a genteel and subtle manner, proving himself a
gentleman, a statesman of kind heart who used satirical writing to teach people. It is true that Khuyên gave vent to his feelings in his poetry but if we read it with care, we can find in it a patronizing tone of a superior person who is annoyed by his inferiors' exhibition of discontent. He frequently uses the traditional image of a woman with whom he identifies, implying his own weakness and reliance on others.

Despite his complete withdrawal from the political arena, Nguyễn Khuyên constantly faced emotional disturbance as revealed in many of his poems: his mind was clearly not at peace, nor his heart and spirit in harmony with the universe. But it was not so much the French domination that accounted for his state of mind, rather it was his own frustration and feeling of helplessness to combat the chaos and cultural decay of Vietnam. Khuyên felt the heavy burden of responsibility arising from his academic achievement, which placed the onus on mandarins such as himself to provide forceful leadership in the time of crisis. He was more greatly troubled by this responsibility than many others of his class, and he became preoccupied with guilt and self-criticism over his failure.

It is true that Nguyễn Khuyên could not offer any solution to his country, nor could he foster a recovery of the old order. But what people and even sternly anti-feudal Vietnamese today admire most are his personal, exemplary behaviour, his maintenance of a firm stand of non-collaboration with the French - even with the French-controlled Court, and, above all, his constant concern and grief over the national scene and the future of Vietnam. To the best of his ability, Nguyễn Khuyên strove to set an example for his own generation and for the younger generation.

60 Dương Quang Hân, Vietnam Văn Hóa Sứ Yêu, p. 398.
Although Khuyên neither vigorously promoted anti-French resistance, nor took violent measures himself, he is a genuine patriot, with heart and soul for the country. In his gentle and noble manner he set up the record of a quan tǎ (superior gentleman) who knew a proper way of maintaining his principles - the unshakable principles of a disciplined and determined mind.

There is no mistaking Khuyên's literary skill. He himself translated some of his poems in Chinese into Nôm or vice versa. The poems written in both Chinese and Nôm were so beautifully matched that it is hard to determine in which language the poems were first composed. His poems in Chinese are highly condensed and penetrating, expressing cleverly the poet's innermost feelings. These poems were intended for the audience of the scholar class and were too esoteric to be read by commoners. His poems in Nôm, on the other hand, had great popular appeal. Their appeal arose partly from their rustic subject matter and the occupations, anxieties, and fellow feeling of peasants - and partly from their simple and expressive language free of obscure Chinese clichés. Phan Kế Bính remarked: 'his style of writing is so smooth, lively and natural that one feels it is just like a fish swimming silently in the water or like birds landing lightly on flowers.'

His patriotism had its limitations, but the people always have the honour of treasuring it, especially since it was conveyed in an outstanding and skillful art.

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61 Quoted from Võ Thu Tinh, Các Tác Giả..., p. 302.
62 Nguyễn Văn Tú, Thơ Văn Nguyễn Khuyên, p. 16.
CHAPTER VI

THẦN TẾ X.inverse (1870-1907)

A SATIRIST OF THE COLONIAL SOCIETY

The deteriorating society in which Nguyễn Lương passed his
career led to intense frustration. He was the very one to which Trần Tế Xương
(1870-1907) grew up, pursued traditional studies, and looked forward
to a bright future. During the years from 1886 to 1896, Xương made
eight unsuccessful attempts to pass the Thanh Hôn examination - the
gateway leading to the mandarinate. During this same period of the
French, following their successful pacification of Cochinchina, increased
their power and influence in the political and cultural life of Cochinchina.

Surprisingly, Xương, with his traditional literary training, reacted
bitterly to whatever challenged or dented his life and career prospects.

Trần Tế Xương's life typifies the tragedy which befell the generation
just embarking on the traditional Confucian training at the time of
the French invasion. A gifted young man, he was caught in the middle
between two worlds - the Confucian values to which he was
instructed to adhere and the pressures of the new society.

Xương was born in 1870 in Yesteem, a small village in
the center of Hậu Giang province. His family was relatively
well-off and he received an excellent education. His family was
therefore moderately rich. Xương excelled in his studies and
passed the Thanh Hôn examination, gaining national recognition.

Trần Tế Xương continued this trend in his work. Writing in the French
language, he wrote "Việt Nam và Thế giới" (At the end of the list in the year of the author), "Việt Nam và Thế giới" (At the end of the list in the year of the author), and "Những Truyện Trần Tế Xương," which are considered classics.

From the evidence, he was admitted as..."
The deteriorating society in which Nguyễn Khuyến passed his retirement in frustration was the very one in which Trần Thế Xương (1870-1907) grew up, pursued traditional studies, and looked forward to a bright future. During the years from 1886 to 1906, Xương made eight unsuccessful attempts to pass the Thi H Dick examination – the gateway leading to the mandarinate. During this same period the French, following their successful pacification of Tonkin, increased their power and influence in the political and cultural life of Tonkin. Not surprisingly, Xương, with his traditional literary training, reacted bitterly to whatever challenged or damaged his life and career prospects. Trần Thế Xương's life typifies the tragedy which befell the generation just embarking on the traditional Confucian training at the time of the French invasion. As Thanh Lãng notes:

It (Vietnam) was/disturbed society in which all traditional bonds were loosened. The old cultural edifice to which our scholars clung was shaking and falling to the ground piece by piece. Tù Xương's achievement clearly bore the mark of his historical period - that of the loss of his country. ¹

This chapter examines the work of Trần Thế Xương, a gifted young poet with great insight into the far-reaching impact of French colonialism in his country.

Trần Thế Xương was born in 1870 in Vị Xuyên, a small village in the centre of Nam Định province. His father was a village notable who also ran a shop in the province town of Nam Định. His family was therefore moderately rich. He appeared bright at an early age yet only passed one examination in his whole life. This was the Tù Tải which he passed in 1894, though he was placed at the bottom of the list of successful candidates.² Thereafter he was addressed as

Tú Xưởng (Tú Tài Graduate Vũ). He failed all attempts at higher examinations and he never had a permanent job, only some part-time teaching assignments at a local school. His wife had, he said:

To sell goods on the river bank the whole year round
To support five children and her husband. ³

Moreover, tragedy befell the whole family, driving them into poverty. This occurred because Xưởng was cheated by a friend and as a result had to sell his house and land to pay the latter's debts. ⁴

This scanty biography is obviously insufficient to come to an understanding of Xưởng. To do him justice it is necessary to look into his poetry, which not only secures for him fame as an outstanding Nôm poet of the nineteenth century, but also reflects the dilemma of young Confucian scholars during the stormy years of French assertion and domination, which covered the whole of Xưởng's life.

Tú Xưởng took his poetic themes from within his own environment and became known as 'the poet of Côi Mountain and Vị River'. This was a complimentary title given to him by his contemporaries to denote his being both a poet and a product of his own province which possessed two spectacular landmarks: Côi Mountain and Vị River. However, the predominant themes in Xưởng's works are his own lack of success, the decline of the traditionally educated class and of Confucian studies themselves, the growth of an unfamiliar and alien colonial administration, and his own thirst for a relatively luxurious material life.

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³ Quoted from Praises to my Wife (Khen Vợ) See Khieu Đức Long, Trần Tế Xưởng, Sài Gòn, Trương Sơn, 1972, p. 81.

⁴ Xưởng wrote about this tragedy in Self Lamentation as Spring Approaches (Gâm Tế Thương Thân):
   Trusting my friend I got into trouble
   Because of him I suffered poverty.
Xưởng guaranteed for his friend's debts. The latter refused to pay back to the lender. Therefore Xưởng was in trouble. Trần Trung Vién, Văn Ðiện Bảo Giảm, III, p. 42.
VIEWS ON THE FRENCH CONTROLLED EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

To improve their administration and to ensure Vietnamese collaboration in Tonkin, the French began to augment the traditional Vietnamese system of education by establishing a number of schools to train interpreters, future officials, and teachers for their own administrative apparatus. The first Resident Superior of Tonkin and Annam, Paul Bert, founded a School of Interpreters in Hà-Nội in 1886 for the teaching of French, Quốc Ngữ, Mathematics, and Chinese. In the same year, in order to promote the French language and civilization, Bert created the Academy of Tonkin, also in Hà-Nội. He became its first president. Although the Academy attracted many Vietnamese mandarins and scholars, the French still sought to stop Chinese influence and to promote their culture: In 1887 they established two girls' schools in Hà-Nội to which even mature students were admitted. This was a great innovation in Vietnam, where, traditionally, women were not formally educated at all. This could also be seen in sociological terms, as an indirect attack on Confucianism, which subordinates women to men. In all, a further five schools were established for the purpose of spreading French civilization. One of them, the Bavie School, established in 1905, was designed to prepare sons and daughters of Vietnamese mandarins and wealthy merchants for study in France. The History of Hà-Nội Capital (Lịch Sử Thủ đô Hà Nội) tells us that the total number of students attending these specialised state schools amounted to 1,800 by 1907. In addition, the French authorities in Hà-Nội allowed six private schools to satisfy local demand for the new education.5

Judging by the quality of these establishments there is no mistaking the ambition of the French to change the thousand year old

education system of Tonkin. The French had already used the same approach in Cochinchina where they largely eliminated the use of Chinese characters and the study of Chinese Classics. By 1882 they had succeeded in making Quốc Ngữ the second official language of the colony after French.\(^6\) But because Tonkin was the stronghold of Confucian Studies and traditional examinations the French hesitated to make any drastic move in Tonkin. It was not until 1917 that they finally suppressed classical studies. Until then, the French maintained the old examination system. This placated local opinion and gained time in which they could train a new elite group of modern scholars. Although the French permitted the old educational system in Tonkin to continue, this served to highlight the moribund state of traditional studies. The increasingly obvious irrelevance of these caused difficulties for scholars in the Classics. The introduction of new subjects by the French, and the local demand for new scholarship and learning decreased the significance of the Mandarinal examinations. The traditional examinations were further discredited by the fact that the French did not hesitate to employ, within their administration, Vietnamese personnel without traditionally recognised qualifications or abilities.

Despite the new developments, Xương clung to traditional study as shown in his repeated attempts in the Thi Hưởng examinations.\(^7\) His motivation consisted not only of a desire to secure a place in the traditional administrative hierarchy; he was also ambitious for the personal prestige he could gain from pursuing the scholastic way of life followed by many from Nam Định, which was a recognized cradle

\(^6\) For more information on this, see Milton Osborne, The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia, pp. 107-108, 156-171.

\(^7\) Xướng sat for the examinations in the years 1885, 1888, 1891, 1894, 1897, 1900, 1903, and 1906.
of learning.

His repeated failure made him critical of the Confucian examination system of his time. He felt it was improperly conducted by corrupt officials, and manipulated by the French. A series of poems which Xuong wrote on the topic of examinations and education form a merciless attack which is mingled with bitterness at his own failure. Convinced of his own intelligence, he directed his anger and hatred at those who were luckier than himself. On one occasion he hurled a stunning blow at the lucky graduates:

For this session a few Doctors were selected
But truly this mere gentleman [himself] is the best educated.8

Tu Xuong attacked people by name and by their degrees:

Cũ Nhân is the bourgeoisie Kỹ
Tú Thái is that military Mỹ
What kind of examination is this?
It is devised by monkeys, and those who pass are all monkeys too!9

or

Cũ Thăng, Director of Studies Mỹ, Tú Hổ
The three of you share the same pot ( demonstrations).10

His play on the word 'đờ' (pot) was most clever and telling as 'đờ'
conveys at least four different meanings: snapshot, something bad,
an ink pot, or worst of all, considering that the poet came from the North where it is a dialect word meaning vagina. In these lines there is no denying Tu Xuong's desire to lay bare the pretensions of the academicians, and to lower their social prestige.

8 See poem The New Doctoral Degree (Ông Nghe mới) Trần Trung Viên, Văn bản Báo Giảm, III, p. 84.
10 Ibid., p. 35. It is recorded in Trần Thanh Mại, Trọng Động Sống Vĩ, Saigon, Tấn Việt, 1973, p. 71, that the Director of Studies of Nam Định visited Hà Nội together with his two degree-holding friends. There they had a photograph together. Upon their return to Nam Định, they showed their snapshot to Tu Xuong and requested him to write a short poem for it. Seeing the opportunity Tu Xuong wrote on the back of the snapshot these lines to attack them.
The poet also called attention to the existence of partiality in the examinations by presenting the case of a student who got his degree owing to the fact that he was the student of the Governor.

No one can compete with the 5th ranking Cu' Nhan holder. He is the student of the Hanoi Governor.

On hearing the news, his grandmother burst out laughing
And dropped into the swamp the basketful of crabs she was holding.\(^{11}\)

Here the criticism is acute as Tú Xêng purposely drew attention to the fact that even the grandmother, an old, unlettered nobody belonging to traditional Vietnamese society, was aware of the partiality shown to her grandson and had to laugh her head off as a result.

Bitterness was present in Tú Xêng's tone when he revealed his own experience of injustice at the hands of invigilators who were biased in their application of examination rules. When he handed in his paper late at one examination he was expelled, but other students who did the same passed.\(^{12}\)

In addition to the unfair conduct of the invigilators, Tú Xêng also mentioned the lack of intelligence of those who marked the papers. For example, he wrote the following about Master Nhu:

For this preliminary examination, Cu Nhu was appointed. He is an idiot and a stupid fool. Literature is different from a medical prescription He should not give his God-damned advice.\(^{13}\)

The lack of moral principle of those Directors of Studies nominated by the French also provoked hostile words from Tú Xêng, who wrote of the Director of his own province in the following terms:

\(^{11}\) Poem *Joke to the Cu' Holder*, (Bnym Mót Ông Cu') Trần Trung Viên, Văn bản Bao Giảm, III, p. 82.

\(^{12}\) Information from poem *Song of Failure* (Phữ Hồng Thị) Xuân Diệu, Thơ Văn Trần Tú Xêng, p. 149-153.

\(^{13}\) See *Congratulations to Mr. the Examiner*. (Mùng Ông Sơ Khảo) in Trần Trung Viên, Văn bản... p. 83.
Dear Director, how long have you been at your post?
All that time your gambling and pleasure seeking have been so well noted.
Have the students committed any crime
That they should be grasped in your hands?¹⁴

The foregoing quotations illustrate the poet's attitude to various aspects of the examination system under the Protectorate administration. Many of his views about corruption in examinations were repeated in another poem by an anonymous author, mocking the 1906 Thi Hưởng examination conducted by the powerless Huế court. In this poem, the invigilators and graduates were accused of collusion, bribery, and submission to French manipulation. The most interesting detail was that the graduates got their degrees by offering their sisters to French officials as mistresses.¹⁵

The following poem, The Examination Session (Khoa Thi), can be regarded as one of the most telling and informative poems of the series as it paints a vivid picture of Vietnamese examinations during the period of French domination:

The Government holds triennial examinations.
[This time] the students of Nam Centre are having examinations with those of Hà Centre.
Noisy, slovenly scholar-candidates carry inkpots on their shoulders.
Incoherently the examiners shout through loudspeakers.
In fully impressive cortège the French Resident appears.
Trailing her long skirt on the floor, his lady makes her entry.
Why cannot we realise the shame?
And ponder over the national scene [as it is].¹⁶

This poem about the examination session in the year 1897, which was presided over by Doumer and his wife, makes French dominance over the traditional Vietnamese examination system explicit. After their successful conquest of Tonkin, the French authorities dispensed with

¹⁴ See Joke for the Director (Che Quan Huong) Ibid., p. 84.
¹⁵ Đăng Thái Mai, Văn Thể Cách Mạng, Hà Nội, p. 25-27.
¹⁶ Xuân Diệu, Thơ Văn Trần Thế Xương, p. 125.
the examination centre in Hà Đông and centralized the Thi Hương examination in Nam Định. One of the most striking features of this poem is the proud and superior attitude of the French colonialists, which sharply contrasted with the Vietnamese whom they ruled. The 'noisy, slovenly' Vietnamese scholars were shouted down to make way for the splendid and formal entry of the French Governor-General, accompanied by his wife. The French were described in a manner which might have been appropriate for a Grand Ball or National Parade. In fact, they only came to preside over the opening of the examination session.

Their 'dignified' presence, especially the lady's appearance in public, insulted the scholars, who believed that it was improper for a woman to have a position of ceremonial authority in their examination. The poem also reflects the disturbed feeling of Xúcng who was ashamed, both because the French had assumed authority over the examinations and because the Vietnamese candidates degraded themselves by unseemly conduct, far removed from the solemnity, pride, and dignity traditionally associated with Confucian studies. One sign of French intervention in the local Vietnamese system of education, namely the appearance of a woman on an important occasion, is repeated in the following four line poem,

**Jest to the Graduates (Dišu Ngủi Thi Đỗ):**

A flock of unsuccessful candidates stood by and watched The graduates of this examination, as they looked so fine. On the high chair the French Dame wagged her duck-like bottom. Down in the courtyard the Gû graduates lifted their Dragon heads. 17

This humorous poem served simply to attack the 'lucky' graduates. But it also showed how low they had sunk: 'the Gû graduates lifted their Dragon heads'. Traditionally not only the scholars but all Vietnamese looked upon the dragon shaped graduation cap as something

very valuable and noble; the mark of an intellectual. But in the poem, precedence is given to the bottom of a woman, which should not have been mentioned at all. The explanation, which Xuong wished to imply, was that under French control traditional values were turned upside down. The French authorities thought highly of their women, while the Vietnamese laureates were not respected. Since Xuong portrays the unsuccessful candidates as a 'flock' and the French woman as having duck-like characteristics, there appears to be a metaphor in the poem of a 'mother duck' supervising the scholars.

That Tran Te Xuong reacted strongly to French intrusion into the traditional examination system is clear from The Examination Session and Jest to The Graduates. This was despite a friendly French gesture by Paul Doumer who, during his first years in power as Governor-General (1897-1902), made attempts to show his personal interest and support for the Vietnamese literati in Tonkin. He did this by presenting himself at the latter's important occasions, but his intention of adding honour to the literati was completely misunderstood by the scholars who took the presence of his wife on these occasions as an insult.

These poems only convey Xuong's bitterness and anger towards those conducting the examinations and his resentment of the successful candidates. However, in other writings Xuong also analysed the reasons for his own failures and their impact on his life. His poem, Song of Examination Failure (Phu Hong Thi), must have been composed shortly before his death as he mentioned eight unsuccessful attempts. The poem belongs to Xuong's mature period in which reasoning and judgment prevail over simple description. A feeling of sadness and acceptance of the fact that his failures were partly his fault are conveyed in the poem:
If I had been serious in my studies I would have passed the examination at the age of 13 or 17. While I have been busy enjoying myself I have gotten older and older yet I am still unsettled.\textsuperscript{18}

or

Believing that I was good
I went on fooling around, neglecting my studies.

It is almost certain that Xuân's own character had much to do with his failure. His loose, carefree attitude and his reluctance to conform almost certainly damaged his chances. He himself admitted that he had loose and fallen habits:

\begin{verbatim}
At Vì Xuyên there is Tủ Xuân
Half crazy; half dazed.
He manages to avoid paying in restaurants
And even cheats in brothels.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{verbatim}

In these examples, sincerity and seriousness are mingled with regret, showing that Tủ Xuân was capable of self-criticism. His latest poetry is at times lyrical and at times sober; these two characteristics emerged after he reached his thirties. His poem, \textit{Self Complaint} (Than Thân), is an example which supports this view, as it reflected for the first time in his life the agony of the poet over his fruitless existence:

\begin{verbatim}
I am over thirty now and a no-body
As I sit, meditating over this fact.
The regional examinations slipped by.
Three pieces of untitled land have been sold.
Rice must be bought for each meal.
In her usual way my wife gives birth every year.
I will put up a ladder and go up to question Heaven
Whether the deity is deliberately mocking me.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{verbatim}

The sombre tone of this lament marked a change in the poet's personality. His bitterness and crudity faded. There was seemingly a startling

\textsuperscript{18} For the complete poem, see Khiêu Đức Long, Trần Tủ Xuân, p. 73-74. Võ Thu Tinh, Cảc Tác Giả..., p. 375-376.

\textsuperscript{19} From poem \textit{Self Caricature} (Tủ Trào), Khiêu Đức Long, Trần Tủ Xuân, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 79. Võ Thu Tịnh, Cảc Tác Giả..., p. 372.
awakening within the poet to the hopelessness of the situation in which he found himself. In the first line he made reference to Confucius' statement: 'At thirty I stood firm'\(^21\) which contrasted sharply with his own case. He was destitute and without prospects but with heavy family responsibilities. This poem shows us a self-abasing Tú Xương, who had stopped addressing himself as 'gentleman' (Ông) and praising himself as before. Uncharacteristically, he used no crude, biting, or sarcastic words, even though he mentioned his failures in the regional examinations. Never before had he appeared so full of doubt and so down-hearted. Rather than merely seeing the events in his life as being determined by the actions of the French and of his countrymen, Xương became more fatalistic. He questioned whether the course of life had also been determined by Heaven. This gave him the power to look at himself more objectively and to resist the temptation to carp at others.

This change in attitude reflected maturity and his realisation that he faced a dark future, as did, in his view, his class and indeed his country. At the same time, his full awareness of his own incapacity to change fate made him more pessimistic. His pessimism developed more strongly within him as he foresaw the permanent loss of freedom of his country and the end of the scholar gentry.

THE END OF THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE SCHOLAR GENTRY

Trần Tể Xương clung to the ideals of the scholar gentry yet he could not fail to realize that its days were numbered as a significant force in Vietnamese society. Confucian literati, who had dominated Vietnam for many centuries, were now being swept aside, giving prominence to

to a new social class who knew how to conform to an alien system. The following poem, *Traditional Studies* (Cải Học Nhà Nhã), describes the collapse of Confucian studies:

Confucian studies have been out-moded.
Out of ten followers, nine have dropped out.
The girl selling books always falls asleep.
Private tutors restlessly wait.
With low spirits the scholars are like chickens encountering foxes,
They compose poetry carelessly to pay for daily rice.
I dare not mock my scholar class
I simply present the true case to my superiors.\(^22\)

Despite its restrained form, the poem is most succinct and more profound than earlier poems, which although condemning corruption, unfairness of examination system, still showed belief in it. Now he saw the whole institution fading. Each word of the poem carries great meaning, making its point with powerful pathos. The response of the poet to the 'collapse' of Confucian studies was strikingly subdued, suggesting his acceptance of his incapacity to reverse the situation. The final two lines also imply that Xúting wanted to lay the responsibility for the loss of old values on the Vietnamese scholar officials who failed to raise their voices when in audience or in debate with the French authorities.

Although traditional studies still meant a lot to Trần Tế Xúting as a means to fulfill his personal ambition, in *Traditional Studies* he did not hesitate to portray their moribund state. Deliberately he pointed out the depressing situation in which private tutors, like himself, found themselves. The dropping out of 'nine out of ten' followers of traditional studies resulted from the introduction of the modernized educational system in Tonkin and from a growing demand for this from those with knowledge of the new languages and modern science.

\(^{22}\) Võ Thu Tịnh, Cảo Tác Giả..., p. 387. Xuân Diệu, Thơ Văn Trần Tế Xúting, pp. 140-141.
As was mentioned earlier, the French did not enforce the total discontinuation of classical studies until the year 1917, but the traditional literati must have felt themselves to be in a precarious situation long before then. Others were receiving better training and they realised that their services were no longer in demand. Hence, the pride and self confidence of those trained in Confucian scholarship was drastically eroded. Từ Xúống's awareness of this fact finds expression in the line 'With low spirits the scholars were just like chickens encountering foxes.'

Further evidence confirming Xúống's feeling that his class was being overtaken by a newly prominent group can be founded in another poem entitled Classical Studies (Chủ Nho)

Classical studies have become valueless.  
The top scholars have nothing to do but sleep.  
Nothing better than learning to become administrators,  
That will bring milk in the morning and champagne in the evening.  

In the last two lines Xúống also attacks with irony those who follow the new educational system and thereby receive material benefits from the French.

In Advice to the Candidates (Báo Học Trở Bì Thi) Xúống wrote:
'The administrators and the secretaries keep all the top and best jobs.  
While the scholars can retain only the bottom rung of the ladder. '

In the particular case of Từ Xúống himself, a failed scholar, the situation was even more depressing. His poem, A Scene of Poverty (Cảnh Nghéo), paints a miserable scene in which Xúống plays the key role of a poor scholar, experiencing bitter humiliation:

Poverty keeps following me  
Anyone else at all? or only me?  
Money has not come into my hands, it has been spent.  
Postponing payment of a debt often ends with overflowing tears.  
Struggling for a daily meal usually means abundant sweat.

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23 Võ Thu Tính, Cao Tác Giả..., p. 388.
Had I known this I would have worked days ago
As a secretary, interpreter, or houseboy.24

This poem is distinctly sombre. It shows the unfolding of his
thoughts as the poet contemplates his experiences. In the last two
lines he examines the option of working for the French, but the
irony of his expression (in Vietnamese at least) reveals he could
never have taken this alternative seriously.

Thành Lãng has written that:

Whether deliberately or not, Trần Tế Xương took part in
discrediting the traditional education and in consolidating
the new. He did this by balancing the new against the old
and incidentally allowing us to see the insubstantial
character of the old studies. The lament of the Bachelor
from Vị Xuyên, despite its sincerity, was no more than tears
of mourning shed on behalf of his whole generation and his
class at the tomb in which traditional studies were buried.25

Yet this seems an over-dramatization of Xương's outlook, for though he
felt regret, he nevertheless perceived the failings of the old system.

REJECTION OF THE NEWLY EMERGED GROUP AND THE UPTURNED SOCIETY

Of general importance to Trần Tế Xương's acknowledgement of the
decline of the traditional scholars was his ultimate refusal to accept
the newly emerged group, the so-called secretaries, interpreters, house
boys, or anyone who accepted business with the French on their terms.
In fact he poured out a torrent of sarcasm against them. For example
his statement: 'Nothing better than learning to become administrators.
That will bring milk in the morning and champagne in the evening.'26

This served to mock the introduction of French material benefits into
the lives of these people. 'Champagne and milk' are luxurious foods,
available only to the rich. Moreover they are typical Western, newly

24 Khảm Đức Long, Trần Tế Xương, p. 78.
26 Poem Classical Studies (CôChi Nhỏ) Xuân Diệu, Thơ Vốn..., p. 141.
introduced by the French and thus represent an adulteration of Vietnamese tradition by the intrusion of the French life-style. By this kind of remark, the poet subtly implies that those French employees were well-paid for their servitude and loyalty to the French. Xương further elaborated his views on working for the French in the following poem:

Hội Đầu Mình

Why don't I take administrative examinations?  
It seems to be because of my inadequate knowledge of Quócg Ngu.  
Even if the Government gives me a pass  
What is the point of having a few piastres monthly?  

The message of the poem is that being in the pay of the French was abhorrent to him, not because of the low amount the Vietnamese were paid, but because of the humiliation and sacrifice of his own ideals that such a step entailed.

Following are more details, which Xương painted vividly of the Vietnamese society, into which the newly emerging class of people strove to adopt a new life-style - totally alien to their upbringing:

- He eats with etiquette
- She sleeps on schedule
- Winter they use feather fans
- Summer they wear socks.

The poem, The Highlander (Câu Mạn), portrays the Parisian appearance of Vietnamese boulevard pavements on which these 'petits bourgeois' showed off their wealth, and their 'French' habit of lounging in café's.

- Sometimes they eat at restaurants
- Sometimes they drink coffee
- Sometimes they take ice
- Sometimes they sit proudly in vehicles.

They also adopted new fashions which caught Xương's attention:

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27 Ibid., p. 177.
28 Ibid., p. 64.
29 Võ Thu Tính, Các Tác Giả... , p. 386.
That man's towel hat is as big as a cauldron
This lady's long trousers\textsuperscript{30} sweep the pavements clean\textsuperscript{31}
or
Click, click, click they kicked the shoes and sandals\textsuperscript{32}
The darker they are,\textsuperscript{33} the fancier their silk dresses
seem to be.\textsuperscript{34}

In the poetry of Tù Xiếng, the image of the scholarly Vietnamese
dressed in black or white tunic, who walked miles on wooden shoes
or with bare feet on narrow dikes and who spent his leisure time
reading classical poetry and sipping Chinese tea, no longer appears.
A different Vietnamese, moulded by French influence and alien culture,
takes his place. The French themselves noticed this change in their
newly trained scholars, as is evidenced by their report placed in their
official record of \textit{Le Tonkin Scolaire}.

On ne voit plus chez notre, jeune instituteur d'aujourd'hui ces
airs et manières du vieux lettre, lauréat des anciens concours
triennaux. Il s'est modernisé. Avec sa chemise soigneusement
repassée, son noeud de cravate coquettement fait, ses souliers
bien cirés, il est d'une tenue impeccable, élégante même: signes
extérieurs d'une Europeanisation, trop rapide pour ne pas être un
peu superficiel, dans sa manière de penser et de sentir.\textsuperscript{35}

In the opinion of the poet, these 'modernized' Vietnamese were responsible
for the collapse of the good traditional way of life.
He highlighted the superficiality of people in their adoption of
French ways, saying that although they had French money, they could

\textsuperscript{30} Long trousers indicate richness, as usually the poor people
like to make short trousers so as to save material. More
importantly so as they could work better and faster (with
short trousers).

\textsuperscript{31} From poem \textit{The New Year} (Năm Mới) Khieu Đức Long, \textit{Trần Tế Xúông},
p. 86.

\textsuperscript{32} & \textsuperscript{33} Dark-skinned people were believed to be of peasant class,
because only peasants had to expose themselves to the sun and
wind. Generally speaking, the traditional peasants could not
wear shoes as they were not used to them. Here Xúông poked fun
at those peasants who came to live in the city and adopted the
city life-style of wearing shoes and colourful clothes.

\textsuperscript{34} Quoted from poem \textit{Spring} (Xuân), \textit{Ibid.}, p. 91.

\textsuperscript{35} Government Générale de l'Indochine, \textit{le Tonkin Scolaire}, Hà Nội,
procure nothing of real value with it, and it only served to emphasize their wayward natures. In his poem *Preparation for Têt* (Sâm Têt), he expressed his wish to open a little stall to sell jam - 'jam made of fleas'. He sneeringly suggested that such people would buy it, especially when he sprinkled on it a bit of perfume.\(^36\)

In the opinion of the poet, these 'modernized' Vietnamese were responsible for the collapse of the good order. Even at the lowest level - the family level - the poet pointed out that there was a breakdown in the fundamental tradition of children venerating parents, and wives respecting husbands.

Over there in that house, tradition is neglected, the children despise their father.
Here, the women bitterly curse their husbands.\(^37\)

While this poem was intended as a general comment on Vietnamese society, it may also partly reflect Xương's bitterness over his own failure to secure the role of a traditional kind of head in his own family.

Like Nguyễn Khuyên, Xương recognised there was a lack of virtue and chastity among the women of his time. He reacted violently to such new attitudes by writing:

Such is the life of the fair sex, heh.
A hundred years pass, a hundred years old, a hundred husbands.\(^38\)

The poet's severe attacks were levelled not only against those Vietnamese who accepted employment from the French but also against the Vietnamese population as a whole. Xương made no effort to conceal his ill-feeling towards all his fellow countrymen in the four line poem *New Year Wish*.

\(^{36}\) For the complete poem, Xuân Diệu, Thơ Văn..., p. 163.

\(^{37}\) Poem *The Land of Vi Hoàng* (Cài mật Vi Hoàng). Trần Trung Viên, Văn Lận..., p. 70.

Imitating people I send out my wish
To everybody living in this world.
Wishing that the King, Mandarins, Scholars, and the whole populace
Might somehow turn out to be of the human race.39

This striking poem gives an insight into the poet's innermost self.
He made the crucial point, that his fellow countrymen acted as if they
were not real human beings. We may conclude that Tú X鸝ng was of this
opinion because people seemed to him to lack moral sensitivity.

The poet also portrayed the ruling class - those at the top
of the social ladder. The image of the King and the mandarins as
actors, as already used by Nguyễn Khuyên, was repeated:

A dime a dozen are those actors worth,
Though they play, shouting and singing 'yea' and 'nay'
They can likely cheat the young kids
But oh, how pitiful are their painted faces.40

Once again 'the painted faces' of the actors are mentioned, suggesting
an absence of colour and expression in the true face of the Huế Court.
Willingly or not they were all French puppets, being ordered around
by the French puppeteer. The lines 'they performed, shouting and
singing "yea" and "nay"' suggested on the other hand their effort to
uphold their prestige and to assert their power in order to preserve
their face before their Vietnamese audience - 'Their young kids'. The
poet made a crucial attack on them by asserting on one hand their
endowment and parental rights 'Đân Chi Phú Mẫu' (Officials are like
parents of the people), on the other hand by revealing his
acknowledgment of their 'painted faces'.

Tú X鸝ng also threw some sardonic light on the corruption, abuse
of power, lack of academic background, and purchase of titles which were
so common among the mandarins and officials of his time. The District

40 Võ Thu Tín, Ăn Tác Gia... p. 354. Khiều Đức Long, Truyện Tẻ X鸝ng, p. 23.
Chief of Xuân Trưởng is cited as an example.

The District Chief of Xuân Trưởng has reigned for full 4 years. Thanks to Heaven, that area is peaceful. He never wrote down the word 'yes' or 'agree'. He simply noted the word 'money'.

Another example was taken from the little area called Song which the poet regarded as the epitome of the ugliness and disgrace of Vietnamese society and the tattered remains of the Vietnamese race in its most condemned state:

The Song District is packed with all kinds of mandarins. The military Governor is charcoal black, the Director of Studies has plague. Sharing someone else's husband is the Tax Officer's wife. Begging a 'Pass' for his examination is the Academician.

The religious group of bonzes and nuns, whom the people revered, were also soiling their reputation. The poet wrote teasingly of a monk being thrown in jail on a charge of improper conduct:

With all your compassion and mercy
Why were you thrown in jail?
How is it possible? Is it because you followed imperfectly your religious path?
You used the 300 books of Scripture,
But failed to learn, unfortunately, how to chase off evil.

Another example given by the poet is:

A bald-headed chap sat knocking the gong,
Two buxom maids stood rocking from side to side.
Under the dim, glittering lights they all became charmed.
By the altar, the girls flirted with the man.

Thus Tú Xưởng painted many caricatures of his people to illustrate how traditional society was seriously upset as a result of French intervention and the resultant decay of moral leadership from those Vietnamese with power and authority.

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42 Ibid., p. 45.
44 Ibid., p. 130. From the poem Ông Sư và Mày Ái Lên Mộng.
Tu Xuông also threw light on the nature of French officialdom which grew larger and more encompassing, partly to fill the vacuum created by scholars in retreat. With the formation of the Indochinese Union in 1897, Doumer tried to subjugate those Vietnamese living under the French protectorate and introduce more direct French rule. To this end, many more Frenchmen were recruited. Of this Buttinger wrote:

Frenchmen to enforce the production monopolies for alcohol and salt, Frenchmen to collect the customs duties, Frenchmen to fill out papers and issue or refuse permits, Frenchmen to inspect and report on the work of other Frenchmen, Frenchmen to sell postage stamps and open office doors and finally, when the manner in which Indochina was being transformed began to have its effect on the native populations, more and more Frenchmen to watch over, apprehend, and punish malcontents. 

This description is echoed in the work of Tu Xuông. His poem, The Commissioner of Hà Nam (Ông Cố Hà Nam), gives an example on the performance of these Frenchmen:

In the province of Hà Nam the police commissioner is very tough,
On seeing him no one even dares to cough.
The house roofs give way under the rain, but people choose to be wet.
At eight the bells ring, everybody lies motionless
If they forget their identity cards, they are viewed as breaking a heavenly law.
Out in the street the dog runs, in the house his master worries.
As for the Commissioner, during his eager search
It is likely that he earns a great deal.

In a few lines the poet cleverly summarises the burden of French oppression. The Vietnamese, living under colonial rule, because of their fear of approaching French authorities, chose to get wet rather than ask officials' permission to repair their homes. Because of the curfew regulations, people virtually ceased all activities after the bell rang at eight. Even a dog running in the street

45 Joseph Buttinger, Vietnam, pp. 35-36.
46 Xuân Diệu, Thơ Văn..., p. 194.
after that time was enough to worry its Vietnamese master. The French were so severe in their enforcement of the regulations that the administered even equated the forfeiting of an Identity Card with the breaking of a heavenly law. Another interesting point is that the French, as represented by this Commissioner, were corrupt in the same manner as their Vietnamese collaborators. The French performed their duties with eagerness and toughness out of thirst for money to obtain rather than a desire /peace and security for the people. Meanwhile, the local people strictly obeyed the colonial laws simply out of their fear of the French rather than out of respect for the laws themselves.

INEFFECTUAL NATIONALISM

Through his merciless reactions towards his own people and his unfavourable remarks about the French and their conduct, Trần Tế Xương stands out as a satirist. Moreover, he gives the subtle impression that he hoped to see the restoration of Confucian order in its pure form. His poem Congratulations to the Representatives (Mừng Ông Nghị Viện), \(^7\) one of the few poems which has a clear political overtone, successfully reveals the nationalistic element in the character of Tự Xướng.

Being a representative is not an easy thing.
Once citizens' rights are affirmed, the country will survive. Whenever they have the chance, they (representatives) only open their loud mouths. Whenever people are badly squeezed, they act as if nothing has occurred.
On behalf of the 18 million population
They reveal the 4,000 year old cultural face of the Nation.\(^8\)
Wishing that they could learn the new word: Reform (Duy Tân)

\(^7\) Võ Thu Tịnh, Căn Tác Gia..., p., 386, or Trần Trung Viên, Võ Bàn..., p. 70.

\(^8\) The Vietnamese believe that their country possesses a culture 4,000 years old (nước bổn ngàn năm văn hiến).
that they are not too greedy for rice and meat like the hungry devils."  

Xuông's severe attack in this poem was probably aimed at the Vietnamese local notables selected to serve on the Counselling Board (Commission Consulative), which was established in each province to work side by side with the French Resident in accordance with the P. Doumer's decree of 1898. They were entrusted with the duties of giving advice on taxation, making known to the French administrators local issues, and mainly conveying public opinion. However, as the poet pointed out, they were noted only for their uselessness, incapacity, submission, and deliberate lack of concern with oppression which the Tonkinese living under French rule experienced. The imagery of 'hungry devils' implies that the representatives employed by the French were simply greedy for French money and nothing else. Xuông attached more blame to the Vietnamese than the French, in spite of the latter's use of passive Vietnamese representatives in their administration.

Mention of 'the survival of the country', 'citizens' rights', and 'reform' in lines two and seven indicated that Xuông was not unaware of the underlying political movement, which was led by two popular figures, Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh. Line 7 expresses Xuông's

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49 'Hungry devils' translated from the Vietnamese term 'quan ăn' which as the villagers believe, are a kind of demons which give birth to cholera germs. In an effort to chase them away, the villagers have the custom of making a feast of glutinous rice, pork meat outside their houses for the Demons to eat, in the hope that when the Demons are full, they will go away.

50 By the decree of 17 September 1897 there was also a creation in Tonkin of A Council of Protectorate of Tonkin, whose president was the French Resident Superior. Most of its members were Frenchmen apart from two Vietnamese notables. I do not think Xuông meant these two notables.

51 Paul Doumer, *Situation de l'Indochine*, p. 403.

52 For greater details on this movement, see David Marr, *Vietnamese Anti-colonialism*, chapters V, VI, and VII.
wish to see the representatives grasp the reformists' ideas.

Questions which remain to be answered are: was Xiồng himself involved in the political activity of the reform movement which he mentioned in his poem and to what degree was he motivated by patriotism? Although Xiồng referred to the political activity of the reform movement, there is no evidence in his actions to suggest that he was ever involved in politics during the years 1905-1907 - The Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục period. Furthermore, none of his works appear primarily intended to motivate people to struggle against imperialism. He also failed to indicate whether he expected, from the scholar class, moral leadership, national consciousness, or revolutionary action. It seems unlikely that Xiồng wanted to direct them to revolutionary action. His belief that the survival of the country lay solely in the guarantee of citizens' rights, as reflected in his line 'once the citizens' rights (quyền dân) are affirmed, the country survives', appears rather naive. Vietnam in his time faced the very serious problem of the loss of central power, the decadence of the scholar-class, and the transformation of traditional values; how could everything be returned to normal by settling the issue of citizens' rights alone. Besides, Từ Xiồng left open the important question - whether or not the French authorities were willing to respond to demands by the Vietnamese.

The above remarks suggest that Xiồng was not a nationalist in the sense of one who strove actively to restore independence and old Confucian laws out of a concern for his people and country. His poem, Dedication to Phan Bội Châu (Đề Thị Phan Bội Châu), which on the one hand gives evidence of sympathy and admiration for the reformist, Phan Bội Châu, also shows that Xiồng felt the revolutionary course was far from optimistic, and possibly hopeless. He acknowledged Châu's gigantic task, by his comparison of Châu's struggle with someone
who tried to mend a broken sky or to fill the ocean with stones (vâ trôi gặpｈời năm mây vế．Lập bể ra công đã một hòn).

Xuông's two final lines read:

> Do you think you can avoid dying unlike everybody,  
> Trying to hold firm the pillar of the Universe.\(^{53}\)

It is very likely that Xuông's perception of the struggle as a hopeless cause is one of the very reasons why he did not become involved actively in politics. Nevertheless, one cannot deny his concern over the dark fate of Vietnam and the incapacity of his scholar-officials - a theme which was scattered through poems such as

\textit{The Endless Night (Đêm Dài)}

> Why are the nights forever dark?  
> When will brightness creep in?  
> The children utter \textit{Uo} as if wanting to get up,  
> The old people drag out their coughing.  
> The flame of the hanging lantern still flickers,  
> The sound of the dog barking at the moon still resounds.  
> Is anybody in the neighbourhood awake yet?  
> Do call the scholars to wake up.\(^{54}\)

In a subtle manner, Đêm Dài also reflects the poet's fragile hope for a brighter future for Vietnam. Nevertheless, in the last two lines Xuông maintained his idea that the task of improving Vietnam lay in the scholars' hands.

The theme of the hopelessness of the situation and the stupor of the people is repeated in the two following lines:

> The country with a four thousand year old culture, whose soul refuses to awake.  
> The mass of twenty five million people are still slumbering.\(^{55}\)

While criticizing the passivity and ignorance of the mass of the people on the issue of their country, whose soul had been destroyed by foreign rulers, Xuông revealed a capacity to assess the situation.

\(^{53}\) Khiev Duc Long, Trần Tế Xuông, p. 91.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 90.

\(^{55}\) From poem \textit{Students Who Dose Off in Class (Học Trở ngủ lớp)}, 
Ibid., p. 96.
Despite this knowledge, Xuong made no effort to be different from his compatriots. In other words, Xuong washed his hands of the whole thing, as did others among his people:

Under the sky everybody is soundly sleeping,
Why should I bother to stay awake? 56

or

Not giving a damn for those who are awake
I just sleep with my earthly things. 57

Despite his avowed intention to disassociate himself from the plight of his country, he was really only expressing intense frustration, for he continued to be deeply concerned.

ROMANTIC CYNICISM

Refusing to participate in the national struggle, unwilling to adjust himself to the changing society, and without hope for a better future, Tu Xuong adopted the attitude of looking back to the past, which found its expression in the poem Sông Lập Nam Định: 58

The river has been turned into fields
Here houses are increasing, there corn and sweet potatoes are growing.
At night as I hear the frog
Suddenly I think of someone calling for a sampan.

This simple undated poem was an ellipsis reflecting the distant, veiled grief of the author over the changes taking place behind his own house at the Nam Định swamp, which was reclaimed by the French authorities in the late 1890's. Here the backward-looking elements in Xuong's thinking come to the surface, the dream of the good old days and the loss of touch with reality. Here, we also see Xuong engrossed in a romantic dream world of peaceful nature, unsoiled by foreign presence, economic development, and urbanization. However,

56 Quoted from the poem Off Dream (Chọt Giắc), Xuân Diệu, Thọ Văn..., p. 183.

57 From poem Summer Night (Sêm Hè) Ibid., p. 182.

58 Ibid., p. 145.
such an attitude was not derived from pure romanticism, from desire to return to unspoiled nature alone, nor from his hatred of chaotic, noisy city life. The motivation driving him to live in the past and to dream he was still surrounded by familiar, rustic scenery (swamps, passenger-sampan) was his striving to find solace and escape from his gloomy, servile existence and his inability to serve the country.

The brevity and vagueness of the poem gives no indication that the author failed to appreciate the constructive works of French engineers. It only demonstrates his pretentious disdain for the new technical development programme. He was not blind to the new appearance of Nam Định Swamp, but he felt the need to ignore it, lest he experience the humiliation of being poor, and the unbridgeable gulf between the rich and the poor. In a way, Xúông was wise and reasonable in this because there was no point in his dwelling upon the solid houses, the fields, and the wealth, which were growing around him and his family, but in which he himself was in no position to share. There is deep pathos in the contrast between Xúông and his children living in a 'low, shabby thatched hut of three partitions' in the vicinity of spacious, white painted houses and offices built by the French. Nothing was more pathetic than knowing 'a group in rags, father like son,' struggling for daily rice and yet dazzled by the luxurious shops and kiosks and attractive coffee stalls.

As for the development of corn and potato fields, Xúông could not participate because, as he said: 'Three acres of untilled land had already been sold'. His great pretention still to live in the past was somehow understandable. In previous decades his home was

59 From poem Scene of Poverty (Cảnh Nghồ), Trần Trung Viên, Văn Đàn..., p. 57.
60 From poem Wearing Thick Dress in Hot Summer (Trải nỉc mặc áo bông), Ibid., p. 38.
a place of swamps, muddy roads, and shabbily dressed people and the living condition of Xuong and his family fitted well these earlier decades.

In contrast, after the French came, bringing with them French women and children to adorn and lighten the metropolitan atmosphere which they created amid the local scene, it was impossible for Mrs. Xuong, who lived under the strain of hard work, to emulate the wealthy people around. Equally, there was no point in Tu Xuong dwelling too much on this sharp contrast.

The French seemed very proud of their achievements in development and urbanization. In *L'Avenir de Tonkin* on 14 January 1888, there was the following passage:

In a few days all the huts that exist on the Paul Bert and Des Brodeurs Streets will completely disappear, which will help to transform this area. Everywhere elegant, brick houses and beautiful shops are rising on the grounds which before were occupied by a filthy agglomeration of inflammable and unsanitary houses of the Vietnamese.

The French strove to transform the whole gloomy appearance of Hà Nội and its surrounding provinces, including nearby Nam Định. They also strove to modernize some of the dark alleys of Tonkin. Undoubtedly there were certain Vietnamese who fully appreciated and even glorified in the achievements of the French. But to Xuong, the more developments he witnessed, the more he felt alienated from and critical of his own society.

Tu Xuong's wish to restore the past found expression in his adherence to old values - represented by the traditional examination. Xuong re-sat the Thi Hướng examination, held as a gesture by the French authorities in 1906, and if death had not claimed Xuong in 1907, he

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*L'Avenir de Tonkin* is a commercial, agricultural, and industrial journal, published in Hà Nội by French authorities. It was founded by Jules Cousin on December 13, 1884 and was published until January 1, 1889.
would have continued to take the same examination as a means of improving his status. This is shown by his statement in an eight line poem composed to commemorate his repeated failures:

...I hope that the government will hold regular examinations.
...If traditional examinations go on, I shall still study for them.
Though this entails a waste of rice, expenditure on clothes, and shameful uselessness.\textsuperscript{62}

Even though the exact date of this poem is not known, there is no overlooking his determination to sit for further traditional examinations. \textsuperscript{62}\textsuperscript{62} Xuong's awareness of the decay and the uselessness of Confucian studies, mentioned earlier, coupled with his acknowledgement of his dependence on his wife for rice and clothes, expressed in the last line of the quotation, underlined the futility of his insistence on clinging to a lost cause regardless of the long-term effect on himself and his family.

\textsuperscript{62}\textsuperscript{62} Xuong's treatment of his wife was indicated in the following lines: 'To earn money is a job of my woman. As for me, I tirelessly get on and off all vehicles of transportation.'\textsuperscript{63} These lines reveal his irresponsibility and, equally, his laziness. Nevertheless, it shows at the same time how deeply he upheld the old fashioned tradition which allowed a student-husband - a prospective mandarin - to depend on his wife for material support, while he was notionally studying for the mandarinal examination.

Xuong went to extremes in upholding traditional values, notwithstanding the fact that the world in which he lived no longer cherished such values. Furthermore, he adopted none of the usual

\textsuperscript{62} From poem \textit{Failing the Examination} (Hồng Thị), Trần Trung Viên, Văn học... , III, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{63} From poem \textit{Self Caricature} (Tự Trào), \textit{Ibid.}, p. 39.
It is said that Xuong used to take tramways to go to Hàng Thao, a district famous for entertainments; and to Hà Nội.
alternatives open to persons in his situation. He did not withdraw from the changing world into the life of a hermit, nor did he conform to the new society, neither did he rebel against it physically. We cannot doubt Xuong's acceptance of Confucian ideas if we judge the extent to which he upheld traditional values, or his desire to see Confucian principles observed by the common people. However, these two factors alone were not sufficient to make him take the drastic decision to withdraw. His lack of firmness as a man, coupled with his relative youth, made retreat impossible for him. It was equally impossible for him to conform to new ideas and the new society because he was deeply imbued emotionally with past values and held a low opinion of the newly emerging bourgeoisie. Moreover, active rebellion was just not part of Xuong's character.

So here we have Tu Xuong, a victim of the generation caught in mid-stream between traditional and modern values. He lacked the strength and the conviction to adhere consistently and resolutely to either. Like many a true poet, he was both sentimental and self-indulgent, he was pleasure seeking in character, and he led a restless and aimless life.

(I am) Top of the country in gambling and fooling around.
Well-grounded in drinking, sexual activities.\footnote{64}
or
Tea, liquor, and women
These three troublesome things keep following me.
If only I could give them up.
I would possibly refrain from liquor and tea.\footnote{65}

It is believed that Tu Xuong contracted venereal disease. His poem entitled \textit{Qua Vui va Dgi} (Enjoying too much turns out to be disastrous) confirmed that:

\footnote{64 Quoted from poem \textit{T\'u Tr\'ac}, \textit{V\'a Thu Tinh, C\'ac T\'ac Gia\'...}, p. 382.}
\footnote{65 Tran Trung Vien, \textit{Van Ron...}, p. 79. Khieu Bac Long. \textit{Tran Te Xuong}, p. 46.}
Why not other diseases.
Why has it to be syphilis.  

Xương indulged himself in the world of pleasure to find solace and recompense for his loss of a sense of purpose - like a glowworm attracted by light and prepared to lay its head on the killing fire.

Even in his personal appearance we see the conflict of East and West, as Tú Xương is seen to have adopted the French fashion of wearing shoes and carrying an umbrella. He admits this:

Yesterday when I came to visit you
I put on shoes and carried a French umbrella.  
or
In my noble way I wear Chinese silk dress, purple scarf, and carry a vivid green umbrella.
Whenever out in the street I proudly wear the Vietnamese silk pants, silk socks, and shining shoes made in Gia Định.

Here the poet stands out as an unresolved man, embracing some aspects of Western civilization and urbanized life as promulgated noisily by the French, yet criticizing the erosion of the traditional life-style.

However, the truth remains, as demonstrated by the two following poems. They show that Xương, until his dying day, failed to find a way out of his dilemma. He continued to wonder about the meaning of his life. In the poem Questioning Heaven (Hỏi Trời), he envied the material prosperity which came into existence under French rule, but which was denied by him.

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66 Trần Trung Viên, Văn dân..., p. 57.
67 From poem Đi Hát Mát ơ, Khieu Đức Long, Trần Tố Xương, p. 63.
68 Vietnamese silk pants (Quần Tố Nữ). It was regarded as the top quality silk.
69 In Gia Định province, Saigon area, the French set up many shoe shops and so produced a lot of French styled shoes. They were regarded as the most fashionable shoes at that time.
70 From poem Failing the Examination, Ibid., pp. 73-74.
I am going up to question Heaven
To ask why I was born on this Earth
I have some knowledge, and yet understand nothing at all,
I know how to attend theatres, to listen to singers,
To smoke cigarettes, and to drink tea.
I have had a taste of restaurants and some
experience of brothels! [But what do I know?] 71

By poverty, Xtdown's actual life was depressing and Xtdown had no illusion
about the kind of life he led, like a man in a maze, trying all the
turnings but never finding the right way through.

His beautiful poem Losing one's way (Lac Diông), however,
illustrates the alienation of Tú Xtdown from this new society;

(I am standing) Alone and lost in the middle of the
deserted road.
Will there be anyone for me to meet or wait for?
The water is blue, the mountain green, emptiness rules.
Passers-by, like lost souls, come and go,
I address them, but I see only the blue, blue sky,
I wait for my Nation, my hair grows grey.
The road stretches long and far, who can give me advice?
Where shall I look for it, how long shall I wait? 72

Apart from its patriotic flavour, this poem strikes a tragic note.

It portrays the despair and the frustration of a lost soul in his search
of a companion or a way to redeem a lost cause. The image of 'the
deserted road' stretching away without end suggested a long and
complicated life's road leading to an uncertain future. The line 'who
can give me advice' suggests his need of a guide to lead him through
the dark path of his life. Xtdown's search was fruitless, as were the
hopes of his whole generation of Confucian scholars. In other words,
they all were lost souls wandering without a guide.

Taken as a whole, Lac Diông sounds like a song of despair, of the
loneliness of a drowning man who is still clinging to a faint hope of
being rescued and of being led to the correct path. Lac Diông is
also one of the very few poems which clearly reveals the agony of the poet.

71 Xuân Diêu, Thơ Văn Trần Té Xtdown, pp. 76-77.
72 Ibid., p. 199.
Trần Tế Xương can be regarded as a tragic figure who symbolised the misfortune of a generation who wanted to choose traditional values but had to accept those of the present. As such, he had many internal conflicts: on the one hand he bitterly criticized the French controlled mandarin-officials; on the other hand he tirelessly tried to join their circle and thereby gain prestige. He made a Herculean effort to pass the Thi Hưởng examination. He mercilessly criticised the lack of morals among his people but he did not himself observe the Confucian teachings. Indeed he led a loose and carefree life. Similarly, he expressed disdain for French-employed Vietnamese because of their adoption of alien customs and urban habits, yet he could not bring himself to boycott the trappings of French materialism.

One of the crucial obstacles to his search for a way out of this conflict, was that he could not see beyond the stereotype of the traditional scholar. He regarded any other profession as degrading. The following poem is a kind of satire directed at himself in which Xưởng confessed his failure in every field of study, and his feeling that he should return to the rice fields:

I know no Chinese  
I know no French  
Nor do I know any Quốc Ngữ,  
Well I should have returned to the fields.\(^7\)  

Returning to Nature, to the fields, might have offered him both a means of avoiding social and cultural changes, and of making a living. This might have been the best solution for a man in his circumstances. But it was certainly as much a matter of pride as physical incapacity that prevented him from becoming a farmer. Until his dying day Xưởng held to his chosen course, which was to be a literary man. He was able to do this by sponging on his wife; this was acceptable in traditional

social terms. In this respect, Xuong contrasted with Nguyen Khuyen who retired to work on his farmland as a means of avoiding political commitment and maintaining his integrity and attitude of superiority over his French-influenced compatriots. Xuong's young age, his scholastic failures, his sensuous passion for the sweet life, his poetic sentimentality rendered him incapable of resolving his own problems.

Although Xuong's personal life left much to be desired, he is significant as a poet, because of his sharp, witty insights into the world within and around him. He vividly depicted his period in which French domination was rapidly becoming accepted, especially in the cities. His work recorded the educational, social, and ethical changes occurring in Vietnamese society, and, at the same time, described his own agonies, contradictions, and desires. His poetry portrays a human drama played out in a disturbed society. He illustrated the far-reaching impact of French colonialism on a segment of the young literate generation (not those who went into Bert's new schools).

His poetry is closely linked with Nam Định, his home province, because: 'Nam Định gave him its colours, features, light, and fragance. In return Tú Xuong offered Nam Định his poetic talent, the power of his brush, his soul, and ambitions.'

There was a close interdependence between Xuong and his environment, which was his source of inspiration. Xuong's identification with Nam Định brought him close to the people of his province; his more sophisticated poems conveying patriotic overtones became the subject of discussion among the local literati, while his cruder poetry went straight to the hearts of the commoners, who appreciated their

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74 Ibid., p. 21.
simplicity, rhythm, and the way in which he described familiar scenes. Xúc lòng possessed a striking talent which added spice to his criticism; it was his remarkable metric use of colloquial language, especially crude words. Unfortunately his stylistic mannerisms are totally lost in translation, but it is still important to remember that he excelled in the use of double and triple meanings. The following saying originated in Nam Định: 'To read Xúc lòng's poetry and to eat Ngu' banningas are two great pleasures'. This indicates the local people's pride in Xúc lòng and their appreciation of his poetry.

Tú Xúc lòng died in 1907 at the early age of 37. Then Nguyễn Khuyên, who was still alive at the age of 72, wrote a two-line memorial to Xúc lòng.

In the underworld, Xúc lòng (in Vietnamese meaning Bone) will not decay,
Possibly his fame will last for a thousand autumns. 76

Here, the great scholar gave unqualified recognition to Xúc lòng's talent. Xúc lòng left behind a considerable amount of outstanding poetry, notable for its satirical and emotional content. Yet Nguyễn Khuyên used the term 'possibly' (có lẽ) in his memorial. He left it to the judgement of future generations to decide whether Xúc lòng was truly a great poet. 77

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75 Ibid., p. 72. Ngu' bananas are renowned for their golden colour and sweetness.
76 Ibid., p. 72.
77 By the late 1920's Xúc lòng was regarded as very significant among poets. The famous poet, Hồ Trọng Hiếu, claiming to be a student of Tú Xúc lòng, took for his pen name, Tú Mộc (meaning Bachelor Fat) which was a play on Xúc lòng's sarcasm, and complementary to Tú Xúc lòng (Bachelor Bone). Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu, a well-known poet of late 1920's, also declared that his favourite poet was Trần Thế Xúc lòng.
CONCLUSION

The relative ease with which the French conquered Vietnam might give the impression that Vietnam's fall was the inevitable product of a confrontation between an expanding, technologically sophisticated society and a static, traditional, agrarian society. Yet to minimize and revert as inevitable is to overlook the complexity of the situation. Even to attempt to identify the main reasons for Vietnam's failure to ward off the 'barbarians' is to disregard the interrelationships between the various causes. Central to any understanding of Vietnamese responses to invasion is the nature of Vietnamese culture. For its influence pervaded thinking not only on matters such as religion and literature, but also on policies towards the administration of the country, the organization of the economy, and the conduct of war and foreign relations. The Vietnamese literature of the colonial period reflects these cultural values and takes on a new life and meaning in providing insights into the country's history.

Historians have identified a number of factors as the main causes of Vietnam's fall. While these explanations are valid in themselves they sometimes neglect that culture was the root of any of the country's problems. For example, Smith, who has discussed the great cultural gap between France and Vietnam, raised the possibility that economic mismanagement might also have been important.

The evidence available at the present suggests that the government itself was quite incapable of solving the problems of society, and that it is substantially true to say that by the mid-twentieth century Vietnam had fallen into a vicious circle of economic underdevelopment. It was incapable of creating the necessary institutions necessary for a thorough-going autocracy, but it was equally incapable of applying - in the guise of Confucianism - measures which would have diverted the actual resources of
The relative ease with which the French conquered Vietnam might give the impression that Vietnam's fall was the inevitable outcome of a confrontation between an expanding, technologically sophisticated society and a static, traditional, agrarian society. Yet to view the end result as inevitable is to overlook the complexity of the situation. Even to attempt to identify the main reasons for Vietnam's failure to ward off the 'barbarians' is to disregard the interrelationships between the various causes. Central to an understanding of Vietnamese responses to invasion is the nature of Vietnamese culture, for its influence pervaded thinking not only on matters such as customs and literature, but also on policies towards the administration of the country, the organisation of the economy, and the conduct of war and foreign relations. The Vietnamese literature of the colonial period reflects these cultural influences and thus helps to provide important insights into the country's history.

Historians have identified a number of factors as the main causes of Vietnam's fall. While these explanations are valid in themselves they sometimes neglect that culture was the root of many of the country's problems. For example, Smith, who has discussed the great cultural gap between France and Vietnam,¹ raised the possibility that economic mismanagement might also have been important:

The evidence available at the present suggests that the government itself was quite incapable of resolving the problems of society, and that it is substantially true to say that by the mid-nineteenth century Vietnam had fallen into a vicious circle of economic non-development. It was incapable of creating the monetary institutions necessary for a thorough-going capitalism; but it was equally incapable of applying - in the guise of Confucianism - measures which would have diverted the actual resources of

¹ Ralph Smith, Vietnam and the West.
the country away from private hands and used them for planned economic development. Perhaps it was this vicious circle, rather than any significant aspect of the Confucian ideal itself, which prevented an effective Vietnamese response to the West in the 1860's.\(^2\)

However, notions such as the importance of economic development and the need for a monetary system were rather alien to Vietnamese culture. Vietnam in the early nineteenth century had not yet recognized the need for change or for more than a minimal amount of trade to supplement a basically subsistence economy.

Similarly, Honey has described the moral decay of nineteenth century Vietnam as contributing to the country's ineffective opposition:

In the world of the nineteenth century with colonial expansion proceeding apace even in neighbouring China, Vietnam remained turned in on herself, defenceless, decaying, and ripe for seizure by any colonial power which cared to undertake the task. The full blame for all the subsequent sufferings and hardships, even those of the present century, must rest firmly on the shoulders of the Nguyễn emperors. At times it seemed as though her rulers were determined to destroy themselves, their country, and their people.\(^3\)

Yet, at the time, new forces were affecting the country and the traditional training of the rulers ill-prepared them to combat these pressures. Thus, in interpreting events in the nineteenth century Vietnam, Hoàng Văn Chi's comment is significant:

In reviewing Vietnam's history, one is forced to conclude that the Han culture, although beneficial to the Vietnamese in the beginning, eventually became, with the Chu Shi school of Confucianism, a formula which conditioned every brain to the same conventional mould, deterring all independent thought and all the spirit of innovation.


It must be seen as the main cause of the national disaster at the end of the last century. The submission of the Vietnamese to Western colonialism was in great measure the consequence of their long enslavement to China's fossilised culture. 

Emperor Tự Đức exemplifies the dilemma of his country, and the ruling class in particular, for he was 'a prisoner of Confucianism'. His profound Confucian training not only failed to help him understand the French, but also rendered ineffective his service to his endangered country. Furthermore, he was inclined to accept his bitter fate rather than to struggle against it. The majority of the Emperor's advisers and courtiers - men of the same orthodox faith - proved themselves no better than Tự Đức in terms of their understanding of a technologically advanced and implacable enemy. Seemingly, the Court circle viewed the French invaders as they had the Chinese in the past. Thus, the main weakness was the Nguyễn Court's inflexibility in the face of changed circumstances. A few high-ranking mandarins, especially Phan Thanh Giản upon his return from his mission to Paris, recognized both the necessity and desirability of reform but their advice was viewed as sedition and made no impression on the Court. Indeed Giản, the potential reformer, was made the scapegoat for the loss of further territory which reform might have averted. Moreover, Nguyễn Trưởng Tố's major proposals were rejected not because they were considered impractical but mainly because the mandarins at Court found they could not bring themselves to accept a commoner's ideas, and more important, to accept an end to their long adherence to Chinese culture and traditions.

5 David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, p. 28.
6 Ralph Smith, *Vietnam and the West*, p. 28.
Vietnam's problems were aggravated by the disunity in the traditional leadership. No strong personality emerged who could bring together the competing factions. Instead of attempting to anticipate events and prepare the necessary contingency plans, the leaders were content to adopt a negative wait-and-see strategy. Even those who wished to fight the French had no carefully considered scheme of action. Minor victories were won, but in every major military engagement Vietnamese forces were easily beaten. Their defeats were not analysed: unsuccessful commanders were removed, yet their replacements used exactly the same tactics. Neither the shock of defeat, nor the gradual loss of territory to the French aroused the Nguyễn Court to change its attitude. Emperor Tự Đức and his Court, during the whole period of French incursion (1858-1883), were still busy writing and exchanging poems in Chinese characters. At the same time, they tried to seek out their own errors, and correct them in order to restore the natural harmony and ward off the French threat, which they saw as retribution from Heaven. During those same years in China, the authorities and officials were struggling to redeem the loss of Chinese strength and prestige by embarking on a programme of reform. Such efforts were significant more for their aims than for what was achieved. Meanwhile, Japan demonstrated an ability to adapt to its own use the material and mechanical elements of Western civilisation. The Meirokusha, a Japanese society of intellectuals interested in Westernisation, was formed in 1871, its purposes being to study Western knowledge in all its forms to see whether it could be applicable to Japan. Whereas Vietnam's leaders were preoccupied with moral attainment, the Meiji rulers were concerned with the practicalities of building a strong country. Also, the Japanese Confucianist learned of necessity to face
facts and adapt the teachings of the Sages.\textsuperscript{7}

To deal effectively with France, Vietnam needed a strong and apt leader with an entourage composed of men of foresight - officials who were willing to commit their lives to non-traditional behaviour even at the risk of appearing disloyal.

The imposition of French rule created many changes - far greater changes than any which had taken place during the periods of Chinese domination and national independence. The French evidently believed that these changes were all profitable to the Vietnamese. For instance André Masson, an archiviste, wrote:

From now on the old Annamite city is completely French, soon it will be awaken to see the accelerated rhythm of modern life. All these French and Annamites, who today profit from the progress which has been realized, should not forget the sacrifices and the labours of this historic period.\textsuperscript{8}

Similarly:

Whatever the gaps in their knowledge of the region, the early French administrators in Cochinchina... carried with them the great, sustaining conviction that their presence was both right and necessary.\textsuperscript{9}

In French literature, there is no lack of appreciation for French 'mission civilisatrice', and the beneficial effects accruing to the conquered lands. There are also some Vietnamese who admired and glorified the colonial achievement of the French.

A glimpse of the Vietnamese literature composed during the period of French domination, especially during the early years, can


\textsuperscript{9} Milton Osborne, \textit{The French Presence...}, p. 33.
provide totally different insights into the issue of French conquest and rule. In harsh language, Vietnamese writers exposed French exploitation, injustices, abuses, and cruelty, emphasizing the illegalities of French actions and the victimisation of the subject people. At the same time, Vietnamese literature lent great support to patriotic resistance and the rejection of the trappings of French civilization. The loss of independence was a hard experience as the Vietnamese had to endure an alien master whose culture and patterns of conduct were intolerable to many. No one can deny the persistence of armed opposition to the French. Nor can one say that the Nguyễn Court, whose central figure was Emperor Tự Đức, was happy to see the alien presence in Vietnam. The small number of Vietnamese converts and collaborators, who joined forces with their so-called 'liberators', could not override the wish of the majority of the people to oppose the French. The four different types of responses described in this thesis represented varying intellectual trends of the time and by no means conveyed an acceptance of French rule. Even the most enlightened advocate of reform, the Catholic Nguyễn Trương Tổ, who, in his admiration for Western learning, urged the Nguyễn Court to initiate reforms, was motivated by a desire that Vietnam might be strengthened to enable it to maintain its integrity and power in the face of Western influence.

As its predominant theme, the literature of the time reflected discontent, feelings of frustration, and lamentations for the loss of peace and order. Most Vietnamese scholars regarded Westernisation as a sign of French intrusion into Vietnamese life rather than as the manifestation of French effort to bring enlightenment and advancement to the conquered people. The great number of scholars
who refused to collaborate and withdrew into their villages - the layer of Vietnamese society which received the least French domination - shows how widespread was the rejection of French material culture. As these scholars withdrew in order to avoid compromising their principles with foreign rule, they made their preference clear: that is more important to lead a free, spiritual life, than a comfortable, material life under French control. This viewpoint helps explain the firm refusal of the resistance leaders to surrender and accounts for the repeated refusals of Nguyễn Khuyên to resume a mandarinal post, as well as the rejection of favours from the French by the blind poet, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. By contrast, the young Tô Xuân appeared relatively involved in the French material culture and he was typical of a generation brought up on a decadent form of Confucianism. However, he was unable to adjust himself totally to the French life-style and values. His tendency to cling half-comprehendingly to old ways showed that although Xuân took advantage of the material aspects of French culture, he still found it very hard to adopt the thought patterns of a truly Westernised man.

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu’s bitter attacks on the Christian converts and misguided persons, Nguyễn Khuyên’s cynical criticism of the collaborators and discredited Court officials, and Trần Tế Xuân’s crude sarcasm about the colonial society - all voiced a common belief that the Vietnamese ought to work together to uphold national traditions. The harshness of their criticisms was partly intended to awaken people from their torpor, while their continual references to Confucianism were intended to affirm this doctrine as the rallying point for resistance.
Apparently, men like Chíeu, Khuyên, Xuân, and others made no effort to seek a way to reconcile new ideas with the principles to which they were emotionally committed. They were fundamentally hostile to Western ideas whose efficacy they had to recognize. Their unfavourable responses and their feeling of uneasiness towards the emergence of a new society imply their discouragement of innovations. They all seemed to want a return to the pre-colonial society in which their roles and values were unchallenged. To the Westerner, the outlook and actions of many Vietnamese seemed largely negative, as evidenced by the various modes of self-destruction adopted by the majority of unsuccessful military leaders, and the stand of complete withdrawal upheld by scholars. The negative responses of the intelligensia reflected their unadaptability—they could only render service to a society organised along traditional lines and confronted with traditional types of enemies. They felt their sense of responsibility very greatly, but withdrawal was the only expedient which required no compromise on their part. The fashionable retreat of the scholar class left a leadership void, which the French filled by enlisting the services of lesser individuals, and also produced a rapid weakening of Confucian learning and training. This paved the way for French intervention into the intellectual life of the people and their later exploitation of the Confucian notion of loyalty to the Monarch as a way to consolidate French authority in Vietnam.

Only a small number of the French possessed a thorough knowledge of Vietnam, its language, and its culture and their voices failed to divert the French from a policy of transforming the country. However, one should not say that the French only rendered disservices. In fact, the French achieved many concrete works in economic development, the
building of schools, hospitals, modern transportation, and communication linkages and the introduction of a new educational system with new, practical subjects and Romanised writing. Whether or not the opening of Vietnam to the Western world can be regarded as a positive achievement for the French, it was a profoundly important turn of events for the Vietnamese, making them come slowly to the realisation that they should adjust their worldview. Their traditional conceptions of a world dominated by China and a life-style dominated by Confucianism became questionable. Vietnamese scholars began to feel the ineffectiveness of their faith, their philosophy, and their learning. This can be seen through Nguyễn Khuyên - his guilt and his torment and especially the burden he felt about his training. Even the young Tú Xương was most perceptive of the failure of Confucian studies in the face of Westernisation.

Men like Khuyên and Xương could not break with the past and could not give any solution to the country's difficulties, yet they began to see things from a less traditional viewpoint, which marked the beginning of a wider search for new actions and measures - a theme which became predominant in the early twentieth century. Thus, more than thirty years after the death of Nguyễn Trưởng Tố, the ideas propounded by this visionary began to receive the attention that was due to them.

The victory of Japan over Russia breathed new inspiration into the 'modern' Vietnamese scholars, whose prime concern was the survival of Vietnam as a political entity. Hence there emerged during the period 1905-1908 two revolutionary movements - Đồng Kinh Nghĩa Thục and Phong Trào Đồng Độc - the leaders of which looked both to the Eastern model of Japan and to the West for guidance in
reasserting their country's independence. From the lessons of the failures of their literary compatriots, the loyalist leaders, and the Nguyễn Court, the newly emerged reformers drew out alternative strategies. What marked a crucial change in the thinking of this group was the realisation of the great need to equip the populace with modern knowledge and training before entrusting it with the task of defending the country. Also, they harshly criticised classical studies, outmoded customs and attitudes, and decayed institutional patterns. They sought inspiration from the writings of Chinese reformists and Western philosophers, their aims being to introduce social, cultural, and political changes to enable Vietnam to take its place in the world without the presence of the French as Masters.

The spirit of the previous century - preserved in folk literature and in the expressive writings of the literati - nurtured the struggle of the scholars emerging in the early twentieth century. The defiant attitude of Nguyễn Đình Chưỡng, the unshakeable principles of Nguyễn Khuyên, the bitter denunciation of a French controlled society by Trần Tế Xương, the tireless call for reform by Nguyễn Trưởng Tô, and the righteous deeds of many others provide invaluable lessons - lessons in patriotism, heroism, honour, and self-respect for all Vietnamese.

10 Mostly Chinese translations of their works.
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