Conservative Confluences, “Nativist” Synergy: Reinscribing Vichy’s National Revolution in Indochina, 1940–1945

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This article is concerned with a dialogical process of what I term “re-culturation”—and the imagined returns to the past that this implies—at the moment of disentanglement of colonial and decolonized cultures. These are the reverse phenomena of the “transculturation” and “contact zones” around the moment of encounter, studied by Mary Louise Pratt in her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*.\(^1\) Instead of examining the moment and site of transcultural contact, I focus on the time and space of rupture and the dynamics surrounding them. The “moment of disentanglement” should be situated later than what Partha Chatterjee has described as a kind of revelation, which he terms a “moment of departure . . . born out of the encounter of a patriotic consciousness with the framework of knowledge imposed upon it by colonialism.”\(^2\) I show that a nativist turn in French colonialism, ushered in by the advent of the authoritarian Vichy regime in 1940, ironically served ultimately to fuel and interact with a broad spectrum

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of indigenous nationalist currents and helped create a new “nativist synergy.” This symbiosis assumed many forms: in some instances, Vichy French ideology was used as a palimpsest reinscribed with nationalist meanings and turned on its head by Vietnamese resisters. In other cases, the relationship was less ironic, involving repetition and diffusion, rather than subversion, and a cast of characters featuring Vietnamese social conservatives, rather than revolutionaries.

These phenomena have largely escaped the attention of historians. To be sure, some recent studies in political science, as well as in literary and postcolonial studies, have exposed the irony that colonizers often planted the seeds of their undoing. Benedict Anderson notes, for example: “The paradox of imperial official nationalism was that it inevitably brought what were increasingly thought of and written about as European ‘national histories’ into the consciousness of the colonized.”

But in the critical phase of decolonization, the interconnectedness and complexity of the relationship between autochthonous nationalism and colonialism have been largely eclipsed by the intensity of national liberation struggles and the mythmaking of postcolonial nationalism itself. According to Edward W. Said: “The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and (occasionally) heroines . . . these too are made possible by a sense of the land reappropriated by its people. And along with these nationalist adumbrations and decolonized identity, there always goes an almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical redevelopment of the native language.” Said adds: “Decolonization encouraged Algerians and Muslims to create images of what they supposed themselves to have been prior to French colonization. This strategy is at work in what many national poets or men of letters say and write during independence or liberation struggles.”

In focusing on the “moment of disentanglement” and nativist revivalism in Indochina, I seek at a very basic level to redress a historiographical imbalance: while a host of diplomatic historians and Asian


4 This interconnectedness has been denied in different ways, in different contexts. According to Henry Schwarz, in the Indian context, “the estimation by native historians of the complex and contradictory ways in which native artists appropriated European forms, genres, and ideologies was, on the whole, somewhat limited”; Schwarz, *Writing Cultural History in Colonial and Post-colonial India* (Philadelphia, 1997), 15.

5 As Chatterjee notes, “Every nationalism speaks through a discourse, ‘historical in its form but apologetic in its substance,’ which claims to demonstrate the rise, progress and efflorescence of its own particular genius”; *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 9.

specialists have scoured over Japanese sources for signs of covert Japanese undermining of colonial authority in Indochina, few have considered the remarkable cross-fertilization of French völkisch essentialism and Vietnamese nationalist discourses. This oversight is perhaps most clearly encapsulated by the very phrase historians have used to describe the era. Overlooking the fact that French control over Indochina remained largely unchanged until March 9, 1945, many historians have painted the years 1940 to 1945 in broad strokes as the “Japanese period.” This is not to dismiss the significance of the Japanese presence in Indochina. Certainly, the very active Japanese propaganda services played on anti-European and pan-Asian sentiments and became a grave concern for Vichy officials. But the Japanese presence alone cannot account for the nativist turn of 1940. If further proof were needed, one could point to the fact that a similarly reductionist trend occurred in other French colonies like Madagascar, which remained loyal to Vichy until 1942 but where the Japanese never set foot.

Indeed, historiography has tended to write the French out of the process of nationalist awakening throughout Indochina. In a narrow sense, this disappearing act is apparent in David Marr’s otherwise encyclopedic study, *Vietnam, 1945*, which chronicles at length the process of Vietnamese self-discovery while positing that the French role in all of this was basically a matter of “[getting] into the spirit of things” and acting “benignly” toward local nationalism. In reality, the French colonizers played a crucial role in instigating this nativist turn by fos-

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8 American intelligence expressed “surprise” at “the extent of power retained by [Vichy Governor] Decoux”; *Office of National Intelligence Weekly*, Jan. 24, 1945, 303. Historian Stein Tønnesson is one of the few to have stressed that the French retained complete control over the everyday administration of Indochina; Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945* (Oslo, 1991), 47.


tering nationalist adumbrations and by inventing a fancifully decolonized (but of course intrinsically colonial, even stereotypical) identity, mediated through a shared reductionist vision. The “moment of maneuver,” 11 described by Chatterjee, actually worked both ways and was the result of a dialogical relationship between colonial and indigenous intellectual currents. In the case of Indochina, the advent of Vichy’s “National Revolution” in 1940 is precisely what prompted a recrudescence in nativist discourse—on the most superficial level by loosening censorship on nationalist rhetoric in the public sphere, and in a more pervasive way by staging reenactments, exhibits, and glorifications of distant Indochinese pasts. The very phrase “National Revolution” almost begged to be reinscribed for nationalist ends in colonial settings. The National Revolution’s guiding principles, after all, were authenticity, simplicity, hierarchy, and the return to tradition, to the terroir and the terre.

In Indochina, the introduction of Marshal Philippe Pétain’s National Revolution in 1940 ushered in a host of perceptible changes—some seemingly “liberal,” others almost “fascist”—but all in line with the Vichy ideal of authenticity. After General Georges Catroux rallied to the Free French in 1940, Rear Admiral Jean Decoux found himself at the head of the French administration in Indochina and proceeded to expand the already impressive political and censorship bureaus, supplementing them with new branches, such as a sports commissariat. The architects of Vichy’s National Revolution and nativist synergy in Indochina included a team of naval officers, among them Maurice Ducoroy and Captains Jouan and Marcel Robbe, placed in charge of sports and youth, the Légion Française des Combattants, and the Service d’Information, respectively. A host of policy advisers, including the head of affaires politiques Paul Chauvet and the directeur de cabinet Jean Aurillac, consorted with the various résidents supérieurs, the souverains protégés themselves, and especially Annam’s interior minister, Pham Quynh, to foster a fiercely orthodox Pétainist environment. Although ignorant of Southeast Asian languages, Decoux fancied himself more in tune with local sovereigns and notables than any previous French governor-general. And he did seek at least Vietnamese-language competence from some of his top advisers in the information sector.

The balance sheet on the Vichy years in Indochina is certainly complex. Decoux was the first French governor of the colony publicly to use the term “Vietnam,” in an October 1942 speech. He insisted on abolishing the use of the derogatory and generic term indigène (native),

11 Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, 85–130.
replacing it in official correspondence with *Indochinois*. But the advent of Vichy also signaled large-scale regimentation and indoctrination, with the arrival of Vichy’s notorious Légion Française des Combattants—the vanguard of Pétainism—and the introduction of a series of highly politicized sports and youth movements. According to Vichy’s own estimation, some six hundred thousand Indochinese youngsters passed through Vichy’s indoctrination camps, sports organizations, or scout movements—a clear sign that the ideological shifts described in this essay reached wide audiences. Finally, I have shown elsewhere how Vichy’s Jewish statutes were applied in Indochina and were actually used as the basis for new legislation, which for the first time sought to define an “Asian” in the eyes of French colonial law. Going beyond the rejection of miscegenation described by Ann Stoler, Vichy’s judicial branch in Indochina sought to draw the precise legal delimitation of three distinct categories: French, métis, and Indochinese. My point here is that for Decoux, using the long proscribed term “Vietnam,” on the one hand, and denaturalizing or defining the racial status of “Asians” on the basis of lineage, on the other (for Decoux, these two went hand in hand), did not present the slightest paradox.

Having just described some of Decoux’s reforms as “almost fascist,” I should give a brief semantic explanation. Most scholars recognize that Vichy was not, strictly speaking, fascist; they distinguish between Nazism or Italian fascism, on the one hand, and the “authoritarian” ultraconservative regimes of Franco’s Spain or Pétain’s Vichy France, on the other. While this distinction is no doubt warranted, one should not lose sight of what Philippe Burrin has termed fascism’s “magnetic field.” In other words, Vichy pilfered selectively from fascist doctrines—appropriating the cult of the soil, for example, and even

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12 Archives Municipales de Bordeaux (hereafter AMB), Fonds Decoux, box 10, “doubles de télégrammes,” telegram from Decoux in Hanoi, Dec. 15, 1941.
13 The figure of six hundred thousand comes from Archives Nationales, Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (hereafter CAOM), Agence FOM, carton 272, dossier 451, Decoux to ministry of colonies, Feb. 13, 1944.
16 Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics*.
the fascist salute—and Decoux in turn adapted this repertoire to South-
east Asia. The notion of a “magnetic field” is helpful here for more than
one reason. In addition to the mimetic elements discussed by Homi
Bhabha,\textsuperscript{19} colonialism itself involved a host of more distorting dynam-
ics, some appropriative, others localized, and still others diffusionary
(which make “mimicry” a poor choice of words, given the level of dis-
tortion involved). The question then is not so much whether Decoux’s
regime in Indochina—or Chiang Kai-shek’s China, for that matter\textsuperscript{20}—
was fascist or not, as how fascism’s ultranationalist (and hence by defi-
nition situationally unique) dimension was adapted and reconfigured.
In French colonial Indochina, the folkloric, essentialist, ruralist, and
traditionalist stock themes of Vichy’s cultural agenda had the greatest
resonance.\textsuperscript{21}

To be sure, 1940 was anything but the first “reductionist turn” in
French colonial thought. Herman Lebovics has documented the inte-
gralist rejection of “mongrelization” and the elaboration of an “authen-
tic” native essence in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{22} Decoux’s politics were also anticipated
by Governor-General Pierre Pasquier, who already in 1930 had argued
along traditionalist lines: “Even modernized Annamites must maintain
their view of the head of state as a privileged being, who perpetuates
the ancestral cult, personifies the collective soul, and acts as a father
and mother to his subjects.”\textsuperscript{23} Thus, as Marr has shown, the French had
either initiated or tolerated many cultural throwbacks in Indochina
long before 1940.\textsuperscript{24} As in metropolitan France, then, in French colonial
Indochina reductionist politics had not been introduced overnight.\textsuperscript{25}
Here, the Indochinese situation recalls the metropolitan case, which
continues to divide historians favoring a continuity theory, on the one

\textsuperscript{19} Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in
Cooper and Stoler, \textit{Tensions of Empire}, 152–62.
\textsuperscript{20} On Chiang Kai-shek and fascism, see Chung Dooeum, \textit{Elitist Fascism: Chiang Kaishèk’s Blue-
shirts in 1930s China} (Burlington, VT, 2000).
\textsuperscript{21} On this topic in metropolitan France, see Christian Faure, \textit{Le projet culturel de Vichy} (Lyon,
1989).
\textsuperscript{22} Herman Lebovics, \textit{True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900–1945} (Ithaca, NY,
1992), esp. 102–19.
\textsuperscript{23} Pierre Pasquier, \textit{Discours prononcé le 28 octobre 1930 par M. Pasquier} (Hanoi, 1930).
\textsuperscript{25} In the realm of settler politics, fascist and quasi-fascist movements and ideologies had
thrived in the explicitly inegalitarian, hypernationalized and distorted atmosphere of Indochina’s
settler culture. Local branches of the Croix-de-Feu (whose fascism or nonfascism remains a matter
of considerable debate) were established in Indochina in the 1930s, and serious settler recrimi-
nations erupted against the modest reforms introduced during the leftist Popular Front era of
1936–38 (when “liberal” reforms in Indochina were largely circumscribed to relaxing press cen-
sorship and releasing political prisoners). On this topic, see Michael G. Vann, “White City on the
Red River: Race, Power, and Culture in French Colonial Hanoi, 1872–1954” (PhD diss., University
of California, Santa Cruz, 1999), 259–84.
hand, from those believing in a 1940 rupture, on the other.\textsuperscript{26} The debate in both cases seems largely sterile, insofar as Vichy self-consciously broke with the past by reneging the Republic but often built on previous agendas (such as pronatalism) and certainly made use of some preexisting personnel. Indochina was no different in this regard: there, too, one can discern a foreshadowing of some Vichy tenets and currents already in the interwar period.

This “nativist” turn found its precedents among Vietnamese anti-colonial movements as well—certainly it predated 1940. The ill-fated early revolutionary movement Thanh Nien provides an interesting example. In the late 1920s Thanh Nien grafted nationalist and Confucian themes, as well as a profound social Darwinian fear of racial degeneration, onto Marxist doctrines.\textsuperscript{27} But rather than investigate the impact of Vichy ideology, or of Decoux’s encouragement of nationalist leit-motifs on a specific political current, I wish to show that the National Revolution produced a fertile register from which a large spectrum of indigenous political constituencies borrowed and appropriated. While I recognize the complexity of actors involved, from Bui Quang Chieu’s conservative entourage in Saigon, to Pham Quynh’s ultraconservative sympathizers in Annam and Tonkin, to Vietnamese Catholic conservatives, monarchists, and other anticommunist groups, not to mention social conservatives in Laos and Cambodia, I wish to focus here on the actual process of dissemination, interaction, and appropriation. In other words, this essay is not so much concerned with Vichy’s Indochinese allies or even its supporters as it is with the way that seemingly disparate Indochinese voices came to echo and use elements of Vichy’s National Revolution, often as a shorthand.

For it was under Vichy that the colonizers plotted, fostered, and carefully choreographed an unprecedented wave of nativism, precisely on the eve of the August 1945 Vietnamese Revolution. At the root of the cross-fertilization that occurred in Vietnam between 1940 and 1945 was no doubt a genuine belief, on the part of Vichy colonial authorities, in cross-cultural ultraconservatism. This belief tempered theories

\textsuperscript{26} There are of course many shades of gray within the spectrum of this debate, but I would cite Michael Marrus and Gérard Noiriel as quite different representatives of the continuity thesis and Olivier Wieviorka and Denis Peschanski as recent advocates for a theory of rupture in studies that tackle the Vichy era, but also the period preceding and following it; Michael Marrus, “Vichy before Vichy: Antisemitic Currents in France during the 1930’s,” Wiener Library Bulletin 51 (1980): 13–19; Gérard Noiriel, Les origines républicaines de Vichy (Paris, 1999); Olivier Wieviorka, Les orphelins de la République: Destinées des députés et sénateurs français, 1940–1945 (Paris, 2001); Denis Peschanski, La France des camps: L’internement, 1938–1946 (Paris, 2002).

\textsuperscript{27} Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, Indochine, la colonisation ambiguë, 1858–1954 (Paris, 1995), 303.
of racial incommensurability between colonizers and colonized with a newfound conviction in ideological and cultural commensurability. Vichy officials were genuinely convinced that “no other people of the Empire are as prepared for the National Revolution as the Annamites [read Vietnamese], for it concords surprisingly well with their own traditions.”

The linking of Confucianism and Pétainism, of Indochinese tradition and French völkism, would be both directly subject to and indirectly a catalyst for a set of rereadings and appropriations in Indochina under Vichy.

In 1940 a journalist using the nationalist nom de plume Nguyen Viet Nam remarked on the astonishing similarities between Pétainist and Confucian values: “For us Annamites, [the Vichy motto Travail, famille, patrie—Work, family, fatherland] cannot leave us indifferent. I will go further. It has actually been ours for years, so close is it to the four duties enumerated by Confucius, Tu, Te, Tri, Binh.” The journalist Nam Dong advanced this identical formula in 1942, alleging that “there are many analogies between [Indochina’s] traditions of order, discipline, authority, work, and sacrifice . . . and those of ancient France” that the Marshal is seeking to resurrect. That same year, an anonymous voice for one of Decoux’s principal propaganda mouthpieces opined: “There can be no doubt that Annamites find in the nobility of the words of the Marshal the wisdom and social weight inherent in the precepts of their own grand master of individual and collective morality, [Confucius]. Both express the same compassion for the ills suffered by peoples exposed to the errors of selfishness . . . The Marshal did not hesitate to make a gift of his person to the nation . . . Confucius, for his part, never ceased to renounce earthly favors.”

This striking uniformity of opinion was doubtless owed in large part to the tight censorship of the Decoux era—a censorship exerted not merely by banning numerous articles but also by concocting, planting, and disguising others. The first step toward cross-cultural ultraconservatism thus

29 The term Viet Nam was in fact originally a derogatory one. It had been coined by the Chinese to designate “the South of Viet.” The Vietnamese, who had initially preferred Nam Viet, or “Southern Viet,” eventually did adopt and embrace the name Viet Nam; Anderson, Imagined Communities, 157–58.
30 Nguyen Viet Nam, “Le travail, la famille, la patrie,” Indochine, hebdomadaire illustré, Nov. 21, 1940, 14.
33 The following (intercepted) letter shows public awareness of just how censored the press was: “Censorship prevents newspapers from saying anything. One must sing the glory of the government in order for one’s newspaper to remain alive”; letter from Bui Luang Chien to Mi Van...
involved cloaking Pétainism in the mantle of Confucianism, or other local religions and cultures (see fig. 1).

Not surprisingly, the equally tightly controlled Vietnamese-language press rang this same familiar note.34 An October 1942 Vietnamese article vaunted the virtues of _Travail, famille, patrie_: “Family is a loving and thoughtful poem, Work is a lively poem, Fatherland is a spectacular poem.”35 Beyond the confines of the press, at a Hanoi theater, a philharmonic ensemble produced a “tableau vivant” of the three guiding Vichyite axioms.36 Postage stamps heralded the marriage of ancient France and Vietnam under the mantle of Vichy values: a 1943 stamp represented _travail, famille_, and _patrie_, respectively, with a muscular Vietnamese farmer, a fertile Vietnamese mother, and a Gaul, holding the francisque, Vichy’s equivalent of the _fasces_.37 Vichy authorities in Indochina went so far as to organize a poetry contest revolving around the themes _travail, famille_, and _patrie_. Vichy’s propaganda services approached Pham Le Bong to stage the contest. Pham Le Bong was an enterprising Vietnamese royalist who had previously spearheaded efforts to unite Tonkin with the empire of Annam;38 he also served as editor of two newspapers, _Viet Bao_ and _La patrie annamite_. The ten winning poems in this contest were then published as a book, produced by the “Service of Information, Propaganda, and the Press” and titled _Phap Viet Phuc Hung Ca_ (Ode to the Franco-Vietnamese Renaissance). They were also reproduced in _Viet Bao_’s successor, _Viet Cuong_.39

As Marr has shown, the winning poems lambasted the chimerical French republican values of freedom, equality, and individualism.40

Several other texts attest to the pains taken by the French colonial administration to establish ties between traditional France and ancient Vietnam. A 1942 government-produced tract, written by Chi Qua Ho Phu and titled _Popular Wisdom in France and Annam_, strained to uncover affinities between “peasant thought and language” in France and Viet-

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34 On Decoux’s control of the Vietnamese-language press, see CAOM Gouvernement Général de l’Indochine (hereafter GGI), 65415, dossier 57.
35 Thieu Son, “A Revolutionary Poet or a Poetic Revolution?” _Dai Viet Tap Chi_, no. 1 (1942): 1. I am grateful to Hoa Pham for translating this article from the Vietnamese.
36 CAOM, Résidence Supérieure du Tonkin, Nouveau Fonds (hereafter RSTNF), 06282, “Théâtres.”
37 The blueprint for this stamp can be found in Jean Decoux’s private papers. AMB, Fonds Decoux, box 28.
38 On this matter, see Bruce Lockhart, _The End of the Vietnamese Monarchy_ (New Haven, CT, 1993), 108; and Brocheux and Hémery, _Indochine_, 385.
39 CAOM, RSTNF 6174, “Concours de poésies ayant pour thème la Révolution nationale franco-annamite.”
40 Marr, _Vietnamese Tradition on Trial_, 97.
Figure 1  Pétain as mandarin: the Confucian genie of the National Revolution. From Dan Bao, March 5, 1942
The local press praised the tome for revealing the “psychological traits of the wonderful peasant race embodied by the Annamite farmer, whose manners are simple and whose language is rough and frank.”\textsuperscript{41} The peasantry and the soil were of course constant leitmotifs of Vichy discourse and clearly proved influential in a number of unexpected contexts. Thus the famous French sociologist Paul Mus, often admired for his defense of the Vietnamese national liberation struggle, would in the late 1940s and 1950s again posit the quasi divinity of the soil of Vietnam and the correlated role of the “terroir” as an over-determined shaper of Vietnamese nationalism.\textsuperscript{42} In a more strictly Vietnamese context, the exaltation of the peasantry was laden with notions of self-discovery, nostalgia, and authenticity. By 1944, taking a cue from texts like \textit{Popular Wisdom in France and Annam}, Vietnamese intellectuals increasingly vaunted the virtues of the peasantry and the countryside. Pierre Brocheux has shown how in 1944 the student, and later the famous writer, Nguyen Dinh Thi advocated a national reimmersion into rural values—in particular into the “creative genius” embodied by rural folk legends. He held that “the literature of the peasantry is the foundation of our culture.”\textsuperscript{43}

Perhaps the most transparent grafting of Pétainism onto Confucianism can be found in a 1942 bilingual propaganda book displaying adages from both philosophies, juxtaposed to impress the reader. The book, \textit{Sentences parallèles franco-annamites}, penned under the nationalist pseudonyms of Jean François and Nguyen Viet Nam, presented some hundred passages intended to illustrate the National Revolution’s “realistic synthesis” of East and West—or at least of Eastern and Western ultraconservatism. Pétain’s lamentation on selfishness as the cause of France’s 1940 defeat was compared to the Vietnamese saying “The selfish man only harms himself.” Shared notions of authority, female submission, fidelity, and hierarchy were fruitfully exploited: thus Pétain’s call for “an upright and loyal lifestyle” was compared to the Sino-Vietnamese expression “Man must be loyal; woman must be faithful.” A perceived common asceticism was similarly invoked. Pétain’s moralizing, “Meditate on these sayings: pleasure debases, joy elevates; pleasure weakens, joy strengthens,” was compared to the Sino-Vietnamese maxim “Vanity, excess, luxury, and sloth all lead to self-ruin.” Most

\textsuperscript{41} “La sagesse populaire de France et d’Annam,” \textit{L’action}, Apr. 14, 1942, 2.
interesting for our purposes, the text presented side by side Vietnamese and Pétainist renderings of the cult of the soil, the extolling of the village, and the quest for one’s roots. Marshal Pétain’s phrase “The nation can guarantee, beautify, and justify our fragile lives” was likened to the much more specific and prescriptive Vietnamese proverb “Rich, one returns to one’s village; honored, one goes back to the country of one’s ancestors. Never forget your place of birth.” Or again, Pétain’s credo, “The country remains intact, so long as her children love her,” was tied to the Vietnamese saying “When one loves one’s nation, one’s country lives on.” The fear of national extinction ran deep in both occupied France and colonized Indochina, but in Indochina, the French suddenly projected onto the colonized their own angst at having become the occupied in Europe (and in a sense, “occupied” by the Japanese presence in Southeast Asia). This proverbial turning of the tables may help explain how a colonial government publication could hark back to the Vietnamese the call of the conservative poet and moralizer Nguyen Khac Hieu (a.k.a. Tan Da): “Unify, love your fatherland, remain attached to your nation.”

In a similar vein, in December 1941 Decoux’s propaganda services published an extraordinary booklet on the flags and anthems of Indochina, titled *Hymnes et pavillons d’Indochine*. The work presented the “Marseillaise,” the tricolour, and the portrait of Pétain, but it also showcased the heraldry, anthems, and royal insignia of Laos, Cambodia, and Annam. The fusion of these so-called petites patries under the protective cover of Pétainist ideology was represented on the work’s cover, on which Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian heraldries are interwoven behind a francisque (see fig. 2). The hymns featured in this work were explicitly recognized as “national anthems,” some of them freshly invented. In addition, local sovereigns were given places of honor in this work. Emperor Bao Dai of Annam, King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, and King Sisavang Vong of Laos were ascribed the same rank as Pétain. The Marshal, meanwhile, prefaced the tome with Vichy’s guiding principles of dual allegiances, an affective balancing act between so-called small and large patries: “I know how devoted you are to France. Love her... but also love your own, small country [petite patrie], because this will help you understand and love France all the more.”

Like the *Sentences parallèles franco-annamites*, this text almost invited

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44 All references in this paragraph are to Jean François and Nguyen Viet Nam, *Cau Đài Pháp Nam: Sentences parallèles franco-annamites* (Hanoi, 1942), ii, 6–7, 18–19, 20–21, 46–47, 50–51.
46 *Hymnes et pavillons d’Indochine* (Hanoi, 1941).
Figure 2  Cover page of *Hymnes et pavillons d’Indochine* (Hanoi, 1941)
the appropriation of Pétain’s discursive register for new, nationalist ends. It also betrays a Vichy fetish for flags, emblems, and heraldry—an obsession exported without the slightest afterthought throughout the French colonial empire, from West Africa to Indochina.47 In Annam, Vichy’s head of education vaunted the significance and symbolism of the Annamite flag, which “evokes the laborious and tenacious expansion of the people of Annam and its national heroes, like Trung Trac, Ngo Quyen, Le Loi, Nguyen Anh.”48 In 1942 Admiral Decoux convened his privy council to clarify precisely which flags and pageantry were to be used under specific circumstances. Thus the flag that by a new decree in that year had been recognized as the “national flag of the empire of Annam (Long Tinh)” —the yellow and red standard later inherited by South Vietnam—was to be used on administrative buildings and “for all the standard uses of national emblems.” Another flag, the imperial and all-yellow flag of Annam, was to be raised only over citadels and royal pagodas. In contrast to both of these, Decoux wished to ensure that Emperor Bao Dai maintain a complete monopoly over the royal standard, a triangular yellow banner bearing a golden dragon.49 Behind the ceremonial concerns of the court at Hue, which passed this legislation in May 1942, lay Decoux’s desire to foster Vietnamese nationalism by reviving the “proper” uses of various insignia. Whereas the British in India had stayed well clear of endorsing flags that could manifestly subvert colonial rule,50 under Vichy in Indochina the French themselves sought to codify heraldries, flags, and anthems and impose them on the colonized in a bid to rekindle an imaginary, idealized, hierarchical, and wishfully oligarchic past.

Vichy officials had rekindled these visions of an “authentic Vietnam” in opposition to the ideal of a “True France” described by Herman Lebovics.51 And of course, Indochinese nationalists seized the opportunity to turn this new, völkisch colonial discourse on its head by redirecting it for different ends. Between 1940 and 1945 the colonizers suddenly fostered long-stymied local allegiances as part of a generalized “return to the past.”52 Decoux took the lead in this regard in September 1942,

47 Documents on Vichy’s heraldry commission can be found in CAOM, Affaires Politiques 898, dossier 18, “Constitution d’une Commission Héraldique de France.” On Vichy recipes for new flags and crests in West Africa, see Hubert Deschamps, Roi de la brousse: Mémoires d’autres mondes (Paris, 1975), 246.
48 Ha Xuan Te, “Drapeau tricolore et drapeau annamite,” Indochine, hebdomadaire illustré, Oct. 16, 1941, 8.
49 CAOM, RSTNF, 1617; my emphases.
51 Lebovics, True France.
taking part in a popular pilgrimage to the temple of Kiep Bac, com-
memorating Tran Quoc Tuan (a.k.a. Tran Hung Dao), an “Annamite”
general who had defeated the Mongols through a determined guerrilla
campaign in the late thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{53} For his part, the Vietnamese
journalist Ha Xuan Te drew comparisons between the memories that
the Arc of Triumph had stirred for Jules Michelet and the possible read-
ings that the gate of Ngo Mon or Gia Long’s tomb might evoke for the
Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{54} He advocated school trips to sites of memory through-
out Indochina. Rediscovery was intended to be as tactile and tangible
as possible. Similarly, in Cambodia, Decoux instructed youth leagues
literally to uncover their past by conducting archaeological digs at the
ancient Khmer site of Siemreap.\textsuperscript{55}

As the Siemreap example suggests, Decoux’s administration set
about promoting local patriotisms throughout Indochina, and not
merely in the area that is now Vietnam. His instructions to the \textit{résident
supérieur du Cambodge} in 1941 could not have been clearer:

\begin{quotation}
I advocate that all local administrators go about maintaining ances-
tral customs, moral values, and traditional hierarchies . . . with all
their rituals. I insist on your using more indigenous personnel and
extending their responsibilities under our control. I deem it in fact
desirable and indeed inevitable, in the development of each \textit{pays}
of the Federation, that a sincere national spirit emerge—a generator
of energy, made of pride in traditions and confidence in the future,
that the organization of youth movements should allow us to chan-
nel and control.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quotation}

Decoux named a certain Monsieur Vincent in charge of youth and
sports in Cambodia. In cooperation with King Norodom Sihanouk, the
Vichy administration founded the Yuvan movement, intended to “ener-
gize” and regiment Cambodians, in an effort to rekindle the ancient
Khmer past. At ceremonies in October 1944 in Phnom Penh, Vincent
and Decoux witnessed the parade of thousands of scouts, \textit{compagnons de
jeunesse}, and Yuvan members singing the Cambodian national anthem
and the “Marseillaise,” supposedly proving, in the words of the Vichy
information services, “to what point our youth movements have thor-
oughly conquered the Khmer population.”\textsuperscript{57}

The Laotian case also bears analyzing in some detail. Threatened

\begin{footnotes}
\item[53] Service Historique de la Marine, Vincennes (hereafter SHM), 171 GG2, carton 3, Oct. 2,
1942.
\item[54] Ha Xuan Te, “Drapeau tricolore et drapeau annamite,” 8.
\item[55] National Archives of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Hanoi Archives no. 1 (hereafter
\item[56] SHM 171 GG2, carton 2, June 15, 1941.
\item[57] SHM 171 GG2, carton 3, Oct. 23, 1944.
\end{footnotes}
as it was by Thai expansionism in 1940, Laos was likewise subjected to a sustained Pétainist nativist campaign, aimed at least in part at building a cultural firewall against Thai ambitions. Charles Rochet, in charge of education in Laos, recalls that under Vichy a plan was drawn up to develop in the entire country an intensive campaign of moral action, centering on young people and using all means of propaganda one could muster in this land: newspapers, brochures, theater, songs, groups, lectures. . . . The movement was to have a mystique—one accessible to all. They would find it in a national idea; this would be a Lao movement. Too often reports are read only by their authors. . . . This one [was put into effect]. We set to work immediately. . . . Together, we created a newspaper (Laos’s first), set up a print shop, edited publications, organized associations, established a theater, wrote poems and songs, organized lecture tours.58

According to historian Søren Ivarsson, this was the first time the colonial state regarded Laos as a patrie, rather than a mere administrative area.59 This particular effort at nation construction also involved its share of historical reconstruction. In March 1942 colonial officials oversaw the reopening of a restored Buddhist temple in Vientiane. First erected in 1561 by King Setthathirath, the temple of Wat Phrakeo was presented by Vichy’s local information services as nothing short of a national site. Decoux’s official travel log describes in detail the ceremony he attended in 1942:

Preceded by their flags and banners, delegations of Laos’s different provinces, schools, associations, and Tirailleurs marched by. . . . Then Prince Phetsarath retraced the history of Wat Phrakeo: its past vicissitudes and the national and religious meaning that one has to attach to the restoration of this pagoda, which for all Laotians represents far more than a mere religious building and is truly the symbol of the soul, and the national and moral unity of the Lao people. Then all rose as the Lao anthem was sung by Lao youth movements assembled at the foot of the terrace.60

From a broader Indochinese perspective, although in these two examples colonial officials in Laos were admittedly responding to specific local conditions, be it in the regional specificities of the culture they were enshrining or the particulars of the threat facing Laos, the Vichy administration nevertheless consistently encouraged cultural re-

60 SHM, 171 GG2, carton 3, Mar. 18, 1942.
vivalism through a concerted and far-reaching colonial propaganda campaign.\textsuperscript{61}

Creating, using, or fostering sites of national memory seems once again a risky venture for the colonizers. And one should bear in mind that the colonial administration not only permitted but encouraged and even impelled this kind of national mythmaking. Several factors, beyond the Japanese and Thai threats, can explain this strategy: an attachment to a doctrine of federalism that fostered a dual cult of \textit{petites patries}, on the one hand, and a pan-Indochinese ethos, on the other; a staunch nationalism inspired by the writings of Charles Maurras, Maurice Barrès, and others; and of course a belief in unalterable essences, be they Provençal or Cambodian. These factors crystallized around a monument erected in 1943 to commemorate a French “explorer” of highland Indochina, Henri Maître. This “explorer,” whom the French contended had opened and “pacified” the “Indochinese hinterland,” was celebrated with a curious column, inspired by an unwieldy blend of Laotian, Cambodian, and various highland minority styles. It stood at the intersection of Annam, Cambodia, and Cochinchina, as if to underscore both Indochinese oneness and the role that the French felt they held as the keystone to this federation. But mostly the site was construed as “predestined to become a national site, like those described by Barrès or sung by Péguy.”\textsuperscript{62} Here the French themselves staked out a site of memory in Southeast Asia, one commemorated in a fusion of indigenous styles, but following a Barrèsian ultranationalistic logic. Only a small step was required to reverse polarities, to infuse a Barrèsian charge into Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian \textit{haute-lieux}, sites of pilgrimage, or national icons and heroes or heroines.

Within the borders of modern day Vietnam (then referred to as Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina), Decoux initiated the joint celebration of Joan of Arc and the Trung sisters, who had chased the Chinese from the Red River Delta in the first century CE, much as Joan would later expel the English from France in the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{61} On Vichyite propaganda in metropolitan France, see Denis Peschanski and Laurent Gervereau, eds., \textit{La propagande sous Vichy} (Paris, 1990).


Here, of course, the colonizers implicitly recognized that the moment of Vietnamese national consciousness had preceded their own—a periodization rich in possible interpretations. Decoux’s hagiolatry of the Trung sisters (pronounced “chung”) was all the more puzzling in a colonial context, because the Trung sisters had recently been upheld as anticolonial symbols by Vietnamese writers like the famous Phan Boi Chau. In April 1942 the French-language press ran an article expressly addressed to French-speaking Vietnamese children to edify them about their past. The Trung sisters, this article explained, had overthrown Chinese “greedy potentates” and the “atrocious tyranny of To Dinh” in a “crusade of liberation.” More than this, the two sisters had led the population into open revolt and had “inaugurated the first era of independence for Vietnam.” Like “Joan of Arc, they had sacrificed themselves to try to free their country from tyranny and injustice.” For the Vietnamese reader, little effort was needed to substitute Chinese with French tyranny. Yet the cult of these national heroines, which by the article’s own account had been somewhat checked under the previous French regime, was now vigorously endorsed. During celebrations in Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon in 1942 and 1943, young Vietnamese girls participated in Trung sister look-alike pageants, while French women performed folkloric French dances, and Vietnamese men participated in mass rallies dominated by the images of Bao Dai, Decoux, and Pétain (see fig. 3).

In these contexts, Vietnamese undermining and appropriation of Pétainist topoi were unwittingly facilitated by a new colonial regime bent on rekindling folkloric regional identities in France and the colonies. At institutions like the youth cadre training center at Phan Thiet, or the admittedly rubber-stamp federal councils created by Decoux, or finally the new university campus constructed in Hanoi under Vichy, the colonizers deliberately fostered a blend of Indochinese communal-

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64 Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 200.


66 On the university in the Decoux era, see Pierre Brocheux, “L’occasion favorable, 1940–1945: Les forces politiques vietnamiennes pendant la Seconde guerre mondiale,” in Isoart, *L’Indochine française*, 164. One of the more surprising university associations to clearly foster a spirit of “rediscovery” was the former Association Catholique des Etudiants Indochoinois, suddenly rebaptized “Cercle Renaissance” under Vichy; VNNA, Residence Supérieure du Tonkin, 79.815. Vann has noted that the equivalent of a “small ethnic theme park” was erected as part of the *cité universitaire* in an effort to reroot the “Annamites” in their supposedly organically rural settings; “White City on the Red River,” 290.
Figure 3  Young Vietnamese men in formation in front of the portraits of Bao Dai and Jean Decoux, with the flag of Annam at the center in the background (top); “French provincial dances,” Joan of Arc Day, Hanoi, 1942 (bottom). Note the juxtaposition of French folklore and Vietnamese regimentation. From Indochine hebdomadaire illustrée, May 21, 1942
ism, on the one hand, and racialist and cultural local particularism, on the other. This “regionalism” as Decoux read it, often expressed in terms of a cult of the petite patrie (Laos, Cambodia, or Vietnam), was seen as operating on a different affective level from national sentiments, which were to be directed toward the “fatherland” or the Indochinese federation. This stratification of imagined communities in colonial Indochina in many ways mirrored the duality of identification in modern France, where, as Anne-Marie Thiesse has shown, the cult of the petite patrie was considered not just compatible with but actually necessary for the cult of the greater patrie. At least partly as a result of transposing this belief in the compatibility of regionalism and nationalism to the colonial sphere, there emerged in Indochina under Vichy multiple forms of identity construction—overlapping “imagined communities,” as it were. These, in turn, allowed future Vietnamese elites to lay symbolic claims to the entire Indochinese peninsula, from Cambodia to the borders of China. Thus proponents of greater Vietnam or greater Cambodia found grist in local Vichyite discourse. As Christopher Goscha has shown, the Vichy years were instrumental in the ongoing tension between greater and lesser Vietnam, or, if one prefers, between Indochina and Vietnam. To Decoux and his teams, Indochina was more than an abstract federation. It “had to be real”—an entity of its own, comparable to France, while Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam constituted regions comparable to Corsica or the Basque region.

Decoux and his team frequently reflected, ex post facto, on their promotion of nationalist sentiments in Indochina between 1940 and 1945. Maurice Ducoroy acknowledged that he had been accused of unwittingly training a cohort of future Viet Minh. Decoux himself recalled in his 1949 memoirs, “I often insisted that within the fédération indochinoise, each pays had the right, even the duty, openly to claim its own local patriotism, to remain faithful to its religion, its history, its sovereign, if it had one, on the condition, however, that it never forget that, next to and even above the petite patrie, their thoughts had

67 This discourse has led Anne Raffin to argue that Decoux perpetuated the republican ideal of assimilation and universalism; Raffin, “The Integration of Difference in French Indochina during World War II: Organizations and Ideology Concerning Youth,” Theory and Society 31 (2002): 365. On an earlier, metropolitan French, and leftist (Popular Front era) attempt to reconcile region and nation, modernity and tradition, see Shanny Peer, France on Display: Peasants, Provincials, and Folklore in the 1937 Paris World’s Fair (Albany, NY, 1998).


70 Maurice Ducoroy, Ma trahison en Indochine (Paris, 1949), 16.
to go to the larger French patrie. . . . Thus, while I recognized and even encouraged particular patriotisms, I strongly condemned nationalism in all its forms.”

Similarly, according to Georges Pisier, editor of Vichy’s main local propaganda mouthpiece, *Indochine, hebdomadaire illustré*: “The Admiral was not even hostile to the unification of the three Ky (Annam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina), although he did not dare say so yet, for fear of offending the Cochinchinese. He supported and encouraged the exaltation of patriotic virtues, so long as they were accompanied by that of the grande patrie, France.”

This seems a textbook case of Thiesse’s model. Convinced that they could play the cards of diversity, ethnicity, and difference to their advantage, as had countless French officials before them, Vichyite administrators embarked on a calculated strategy of bolstering local allegiances, stoking patriotic sentiment, fostering rediscovery, and strengthening particularism.

The new *cité universitaire* of the Indochinese University in Hanoi provides a lens through which to study some of these tensions in an Indochinese context. The school song, adopted by the university’s students in 1942, referred to a single, greater Indochina:

> From the coast of Annam to the ruins of Angkor,  
> Across the mountains of the South to the North  
> A voice rises:  
> Serve the beloved homeland  
> Always, without reproach and without fear,  
> To make the future brighter.  
> Joy, fervor, and youth  
> Are full of firm promises.  
> To serve you, Dear Indochina!  
> With heart and discipline!  
> Such is our goal, such is our law,  
> And nothing will make our faith waver.  
> Students! Our glorious past  
> Remains present in our memories.  
> We are the sons of these great heroes who fought long ago  
> For this beautiful land.  
> Let us be proud of our ancestors.

Blending Vichyite values of fanaticism, youth, discipline, duty, and virility, on the one hand, with the cult of a fancifully unified Indochinese past featuring Angkor, the Chams, and the repulsion of Chinese and Mongol invaders, on the other, these couplets in many ways encapsu-

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73 “Marche des étudiants, chant fédéral de l’Université indochnoise,” *La tribune indochnoise*, July 1, 1942, 1–2.
late a greater Indochinese vision that was refined under Vichy. On a more superficial level, it is striking how willing French colonizers were to see the memory of former national liberation struggles publicly and repeatedly evoked. Admittedly, these themes of unity, patriotism, and even irredentism were of some short-term benefit to a French colonial administration jockeying for position against increasingly hostile and powerful neighbors (Japan and Thailand, even China). Perhaps, more optimistically, the colonizers seem also to have hoped that this appeal to greater Indochina would remain cultural rather than national.

So consumed was the Vichy administration with promoting Indochinese authenticity that it failed to detect seemingly obvious signs that this message was being redirected for nationalist ends. For instance, an undated proclamation that Emperor Bao Dai submitted to Jean Decoux for inspection, and that was found in Decoux’s personal papers, was replete with references to invaders whom the Vietnamese had vanquished: “Ten and a half centuries under the yoke of China could not stifle the conscience of our race, which, after many travails, crystallized to such a point that a signal by Ngo Quyen, avenging his father, sufficed to rally an entire people and to liberate the homeland”; or again: “Our people can claim proudly before their neighbors that they are the descendants of those who stopped the Mongol invasion.”

To be sure, Decoux welcomed any hint that the Vietnamese would resist a possible Japanese annexation of Vietnam. And no doubt he delighted in, and may have in fact instigated, Bao Dai’s musings on the conscience of a Vietnamese race. Still, Vichy’s proconsul seems to have missed the more ominous, and ultimately accurate, implication that the French could soon be added to the long list of intruders defeated in Indochina. But surely this meaning did not escape the Vietnamese. Hy Van Luong has shown how in a northern Vietnamese village in the late 1920s, annual ceremonies were held to honor figures and deities responsible for repelling past intruders from the Red River Delta—a set of references that Luong describes as “evocative symbols of the precolonial native tradition that had served to unite the indigenous population in the... anti-French resistance.”

One should not, of course, be altogether surprised at Decoux’s permissiveness on this score: after all, his cultural services were themselves busy rewriting the Indochinese past with precisely the same “nativist” spin. And Decoux’s political and cultural bureaus, Goscha has

74 CAOM, 14PA 28, “Projet de proclamation au peuple d’Annam.”
suggested, far outclassed Ho Chi Minh’s at the time in their size, training, erudition, and clout. Decoux’s teams mustered tremendous resources (especially telling in a time of war and great restrictions) with which to articulate their own visions of Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian identities, all subsumed under the umbrella of a “real and living Indochinese identity.”

This attempt to revive the memory of a distant Indochinese past and to foster a set of reductionist Indochinese identities certainly sharpened and enabled a new nationalist rhetoric. Sometimes this appropriative act could be relatively straightforward. Take this 1942 French-language editorial by Bui Quang Chieû, leader of the Constitutionalist Party, described as “bourgeois” by Marr: “After having taken stock—with satisfaction and pride—of the congruence between the principles enunciated by Marshal [Pétain] and those taught by Confucius, certain educated Annamites have begun to prepare for the return to traditional morality, for the study of Chinese characters: in short, for everything which can bring back the personality of Annam as an ancient and high civilization. [In this domain] there can be no small reforms, only major ones.” Here, Bui Quang Chieû took as a starting point the often repeated affinity between Confucius and Pétain and drew from it a license for rediscovery. Others, resorting to slightly more complex devices, played on Decoux’s systematic reneging and outright condemnation of the previous French regime—a republic whose colonies of course had been utterly devoid of substantive republican content. Hence it became common among Vietnamese nationalists to speak overtly of pre-1940 French “errors”—in appearance only repeating Pétain’s antirepublican and self-flagellating rhetoric, but in practice repudiating the colonizing nation itself. In 1941, using exactly this oppositional technique, the Hanoi-based teacher Nguyen Manh Tuong lambasted Third Republic France while extolling the essence, history, and culture of Vietnam, and all in a tone and manner that would have been inconceivable only two years earlier: “Our old Annamite civilization recognized long ago the primacy of the family over the individual. Our legislation, our literature, our morals revealed the existence of a hierarchical society, acting under the paternal authority of responsible

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76 Goscha, Vietnam or Indochina? 80.
77 On Bui Quang Chieû, see Marr, Vietnam, 1945, 94; and Marr, Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 22.
79 Take Nguyen Tien Lang’s remark: “The cultural action of the National Revolution has shown itself able to remedy all of the errors that once threatened our very future”; “Révolution nationale et culture indochinoise,” Indochine, hebdomadaire illustré, May 13, 1943, 3.
leaders, informed only by sentiments of duty and sacrifice. The contact with republican ideas wrecked havoc on this harmonious ensemble.” 80 By laying a symbolic and prior Vietnamese claim to the National Revolution—a Vietnamese version thereof, which had supposedly withstood the effects of a French republicanism now acknowledged by the French themselves to have been nefarious—Nguyen Manh Tuong subverted the intended National Revolutionary message, injecting in it new, genuinely nationalist meanings. Taking Vichy’s neo-orientalist mantra of an unspoiled, authentic Vietnam and running with it, Nguyen Manh Tuong effectively transformed an almost caricatured Vichyite vision into the viable basis for a new national identity.

Here, as elsewhere, the very implications of Vichy’s propaganda clearly ended up posing an unforeseen challenge to its creators. The idea that “natives” might have themselves invented a quasi-miraculous recipe for national salvation, long before the French, seemed to call into question the power and knowledge relations underlying colonialism. Even the authors of the Sentences parallèles franco-annamites were obliged to concede: “Some might interpret the extraordinary similitude between new French and ancient Annamite ideals . . . to mean that the sages of China and Annam had long ago arrived at the principles of [the National Revolution] and that consequently the Marshal is teaching [the Vietnamese] nothing new.” 81 The authors immediately scrambled to reject such a reading, suggesting that the philosophical parallels that their study had so insistently underscored could be explained in terms of their universality. 82 But these logical gymnastics, which rejected any impact of Confucianism on the National Revolution, ultimately undermined the very objectives of the volume. Faced with the chronological reality that Confucius had come before Pétain, the authors could only protest that any resemblance between the two was pure coincidence.

Even where Indochinese sources fell short of employing Vichyite discourse to overtly undermine French rule, they still suggested novel nationalist readings of Pétainist texts by exploiting inconsistencies in Vichyite rhetoric or by shifting the focus of revivalist discourse. Focusing on popular music, Vu Ngoc Lien railed against the cultural contamination inherent in borrowing from French songs in a genre of popular opera practiced in southern Vietnam starting in the 1920s. Referring to

80 Nguyen Manh Tuong, “Rencontre,” in Témoignages (Hanoi, 1941), 20–21.
81 François and Viet Nam, Sentences parallèles franco-annamites, 1.
82 Ibid., 2.
this trend known as “musical renewal, or cài luong,” he decried, “We find this hasty métissage and forced marriage a shocking outrage to art—not all reforms are desirable.” With the approval of the French, Vu Ngoc Lien condemned the fusion of Vietnamese lyrics and French musical scores as products of Westernization and hybridity, to be rejected as inauthentic cultural imports. Vietnamese nationalists had reinscribed for their own purposes the prevailing new discourse of authenticity and integralism, utilizing Vichy’s reductionism for unforeseen ends. They did so with new license, in French, and in broad daylight, so to speak, for the new colonial regime had overtly encouraged what it perceived as the dissemination of authentic, untainted “folklore” and “tradition.”

A remarkable, though precarious, symbiosis thereby emerged between Vichy ideologues and Vietnamese conservative nationalists.

Vichy’s ultraconservative and explicitly antiassimilationist agenda did manifestly elicit genuine support among conservatives and nationalists throughout Indochina. Take, for example, the nativist line adopted by a January 1942 piece intended for a Vietnamese youth readership and reproduced, amazingly, with approval in the French-language press. According to this author, French attempts to assimilate Vietnamese elites had proven catastrophic: “What a pitiful pastiche! We thought ourselves ‘evolved’ because we wore European dress, lived like Europeans, and proclaimed our individualism. . . . Proud of this new culture—in reality the veneer of a culture—thousands of us ended up ignoring the simple values of our homeland.” The piece concluded with an exhortation: “Let us return to ancient Vietnam, the Annam of letters, of such fine intelligence, with such noble taste. . . . Let us return to the Annam of faithful subjects and pious sons, the Annam of girls raised in the love of Duty, of model women and mothers.” Here Vietnamese and French ultraconservatives found common ground, or at the very least common enemies: modernity, feminism, degeneration, inauthenticity, individualism, hybridity, and miscegenation. Another Vietnamese journalist took up this same theme: “The new female generation, conscious of its role, must contribute to the renaissance of our race and the renovation of our country’s mores.” This source added that in Pétain’s France, as in Vietnamese custom, “the place of the woman is in the home.” It bears noting that Vichy went to great lengths to export its new curriculum for girls throughout the empire and that

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Maurice Ducoroy established the Ecole Supérieure des Arts Ménagers d’Indochine, even commissioning a special Franco-Indochinese textbook on the subject.\(^8\)

Though labeling some of these many trends “Asian fascism” might prove more problematic than helpful, they could nonetheless be usefully seen as manifestations of a kind of syncretic essentialism, no doubt at least partly influenced by fascism’s “magnetic field.” But “syncretism” and “hybridity” are both, as Bruce Lincoln and Robert Young have shown, just as problematic as the concept of “mimicry.”\(^7\) In a recent special issue on “syncretism” and the history of religions, Lincoln has advocated retiring the concept altogether, replacing it with “synthesis, bricolage, and confection.”\(^8\) These three terms admirably describe what was at work in Indochina during the “moment of separation,” when French colonial officials concocted a bricolage of Confucianism and Pétainism for Indochinese consumption, some Indochinese ultra-conservatives reached a synthesis of social Darwinism and multiple, often competing nationalisms, and various separatist movements opportunistically confected new nationalist discourses.

Instead of applying labels to these phenomena, it might be more fruitful to speculate on their origins and dynamics. What permitted the curious symbiosis between French and Indochinese archconservatives? Anticommunism certainly represented an important and basic point of consensus between Vichyites and Indochinese social conservatives. But their complicity centered above all on a perennial and mutual fear of decadence and degeneration.\(^9\) An April 1941 French-language article by Ngo Huu Thoi, filled with references to decadence and inauthenticity, remarked: “The Vietnamese expression $vong bon$, which means ‘losing sight of one’s origins,’ conveys all of the horrors of self-treason, bringing home the horror of this act.”\(^10\) At the most basic level, Indo-

\(^8\) The textbook, titled simply Enseignement ménager, was authored by Nguyen Thang Long and “Mlle Pasqualini et Mme Dupire”; Les réalisations de la révolution nationale en Indochine (Saigon, 1942), 53. On the school, see Ducoroy, Ma trahison en Indochine, 97. The directives on enseignement ménager were sent to Indochina, Madagascar, Réunion, and Martinique on May 2, 1942, and appear in CAOM cabinet 2, dossier 18.

\(^7\) Robert Young identifies some of the pitfalls of the term hybrid in Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Race, and Culture (London, 1995). On the limits and liabilities of “syncretism,” see Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques 27, no. 3 (2001), a special issue devoted to the question.


chinese and French reactionaries met at the intersection of vong bon and degeneration, alienation and false consciousness.

In this sense, not all readings of Vichy discourse were subversive and appropriative: some were plainly derivative. Many established Indochinese elites expressed public gratitude for Vichy’s oligarchic revival. Mandarins and other notables saw their salaries increase and their social standing bolstered under Decoux. In this way, Decoux’s reforms appealed to a segment of Indochinese society that might be termed neotraditionalist, or, as Philippe Devillers has simply labeled it, “the anti-Communist Vietnamese right.” To be sure, there were important distinctions within this broad category—most notably between Royalists and non-Royalists, north and south—but all were united, at the very least, in their opposition to the common “Bolshevik” specter.

Within this vast rubric, one also finds serious differences of opinion concerning modernization and the influence of Western ideas. In a 1942 article pandering to the emperor of Annam, the Vietnamese royalist Tran Dang wrote that the French had helped “Vietnam to adopt some of the values of modern nations. But, at the same time, none of the noble, wholesome, vigorous traditions that have made the strength and grandeur of Vietnam should be sacrificed to trends or fads . . . [that are] incompatible with the political, social, and spiritual values that have always assured the stability and vitality of the Annamite nation.” Here the perennial nature of the Vietnamese nation—expressed in totalizing, historicized terms—is explicitly presented as having resisted the fad of gallicization. In this way, the ongoing debate over modernity or tradition among Vietnamese social conservatives was now projected through a blatantly nationalist lens. This diverse Vietnamese conservative constituency, which would so quickly be eclipsed by the rising tide of communist resistance, was nevertheless critical in fostering nationalist sentiments, mediated through Vichy’s newly permissive rhetoric. In many ways, the discourse of this staunchly conservative and anticomunist movement ironically prefigured Ho Chi Minh’s nostalgic rhetoric after his 1941 nationalist turn.

The wartime synergy between Vietnamese anticommunists and

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91 On this point, see Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 103. These measures are summarized in CAOM, Indochine Nouveau Fonds 1226, 6: “Instructions have been given to reinforce the authority and responsibilities of regional leaders and mandarins.”


94 On Ho Chi Minh’s nationalist turn, see Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 400–402.
Vichyites was of course a pragmatic, integralist alliance, which interwove the image of the unspoiled paddy field with Pétain’s cult of the earth—“the soil that never lies.” At the vanguard of Vietnamese Vichy sympathizers stood the anticommunist stalwart Pham Quynh, intellectual disciple of Barrès and Maurras and Annam’s minister of the interior for much of the Vichy period. Like Decoux, Pham Quynh violently rejected the hybrid, embodied in the “uprooted” (déracinés), and believed that ancient hierarchies and family values needed to be restored. In the words of Pierre-Richard Féray, Pham Quynh and his cohort “constitute an important current of thought: a nationalist current, resolutely hostile to communism, which was conferred power by Admiral Decoux.” The nativist congruence between Decoux and Pham Quynh is perhaps best exemplified by a December 1941 ceremony rewarding new mandarins. After a few short words by Decoux, Pham Quynh declared, for both Vietnamese and Vichyite consumption:

> Annamite society has always rested on a few fundamental institutions and respectable traditions, which, over the centuries, have made the dignity of our people and ensured its survival. Fluctuations in politics might have made some believe that these traditions and institutions were dated. Experience has shown us the contrary, that it is by resting on these traditional institutions, by revitalizing them and consolidating them, that we will better lead our people toward progress and civilization. These formal institutions are well known to you: the patriarchal family, the oligarchic village, the monarchy: each in turn depends on traditions of order, discipline, hierarchy, and authority that are the basis of Annamite society.

Here Pham Quynh makes a number of crucial claims: that the Annamites are indeed a “people,” that the path toward “civilization” runs through reimmersion in indigenous custom rather than gallicization (or Westernization, globalization, etc.); that the village, the family, and the monarchy represent the pillars of Vietnamese society (echoes of

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96 Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 156.


Pétain’s dictums); and that Vietnamese culture rests on ideals of order, hierarchy, and fidelity. This message, in turn, was possible only because of an end to “fluctuations in politics” in 1940. The marriage of Vichy and Vietnamese reductionism that lies at the heart of this passage reflects the very earnest authoritarianism and egalitarianism of both Decoux and Pham Quynh. But not all uses of national revolutionary rhetoric were as transparent.

The question of derivative and subversive renderings of Pétainist ideology cuts to the heart of a delicate problem proper to wartime Indochina. At a time when de facto Japanese occupiers posed as liberators, when long-time French colonizers reinvented themselves as “Vietnamophilic,” and when Communist resisters themselves increasingly steeped their ideology in nationalism, it is difficult to discern motivations, let alone the precise attribution, of initiative. What is important to consider here is that Vichy officials did not simply bungle their way into inadvertently promoting Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian nationalist discourses. To be sure, they were soon overtaken by events. But in reality, Decoux and his minions were attuned to the fact that elaborate role-playing was at work in World War II Indochina. A 1941 report transmitted to Vichy confirms their awareness. According to its authors, their secret services had discovered that “an important decision was taken at a [May 1941] Vietnamese Communist Committee meeting: the decision to couch Communist propaganda as a liberation struggle.”

This more or less accurate understanding of the May 1941 Indochinese Communist Party’s eighth and top-secret plenum at the cave of Pac Bo demonstrates that the Vichy French administration was better aware of Communist activities and even strategies than is commonly thought. It further shows that Vichy officials in Indochina were conscious of being embroiled in a sort of masquerade. It is therefore no coincidence that one of the finest literary accounts of this period, Morgan Sportès’s *Tonkinoise* (1995), was penned in an almost burlesque style, depicting a carnivalesque world in which colonizers were suddenly unseated and chose to play the game of the colonized—or at least their version of it—in front of powerful Asian bystanders (i.e., the Japanese occupiers).

Irrespective of how and why it was later reinscribed, there can be no doubt that Vichy officials had deliberately fostered an ideological throwback to an idealized era of Indochinese “authenticity.” These cul-

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99 Even the most sympathetic accounts recognize Decoux’s fierce hostility to democracy. Pisier, “Jean Decoux,” 110.


tural practices also reconfigured Indochinese identities in line with the precepts of Vichy’s National Revolution—or at least with Decoux’s version of a National Revolution that clearly had been tailored for Basques, Bretons, and Burgundians rather than for Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians. Decoux implemented this nativist agenda piecemeal and pragmatically, and in consultation with his superiors at Vichy. On April 11, 1941, Decoux had cabled the following message to France: “We are witnessing in some bourgeois circles an attempt to regroup once divided political tendencies into a common nationalist program, that we will watch, and steer in a favorable direction.”

As the title of Jean Decoux’s memoirs (A la barre de l’Indochine) suggests, the “steering” of Indochina was one of his favorite themes. But this steering was multidirectional and consequently hazardous, if not reckless. It involved directing Indochinese peoples away from the siren calls of Japan and Thailand, but also away from Communism and toward the sort of hybrid neoconservatism advocated by Vichy. Concretely, this involved currying the favor of constituencies deemed predisposed to sympathize with Pétain. These included mandarins and other regional notables, whom Decoux sought to woo by reinvesting them with long-lost ceremonial powers. But Decoux’s “nativism” had its limits. When asked by Marshal Pétain himself to designate Indochina’s token representatives to the rubber-stamp, empirewide consultative body known as the Conseil Colonial, Decoux selected those he considered young members of the francophilic, Westernized elite. These included the twenty-two-year-old Pham Duy Khiem, a university graduate who had fought in France in 1939–40. Here, Decoux was torn between multiple and competing imperatives: selecting loyal, francophilic members of the Vietnamese intelligentsia, choosing notables more in keeping with National Revolutionary values (mandarins, traditional chiefs, elder members of royal families), and indulging a far-rightist desire to break with the past and build a utopian Indochina on a social tabula rasa. This final consideration carried the day. On November 19, 1941, Decoux cabled to Vichy a list of four young and francophilic delegates who were “devoid of contacts with traditional political milieus.” This was, in other words, as much an extreme-rightist purge as it was a social or “nativist” National Revolution.

In this sense, wooing was not Decoux’s only consideration—the molding and shaping of a future Indochina along Vichy lines was argu-

102 CAOM, Affaires Politiques 2520, dossier 9, report no. 11, Apr. 11, 1941, 20.
103 See Jennings, Vichy in the Tropics, 181–84.
104 CAOM, Indochine NF 2766.
ably his first concern. In fact, wartime Indochina came closest to outright fascism in the juncture of Vichy’s agenda of reinvigoration and regimentation, on the one hand, with its other ideal of reculturation and restoration, on the other. Not coincidentally, it is also in this sphere that Vichy’s nativist discourse most evidently translated into unanticipated nationalist practices. The archives in Vietnam and France reveal a pervasive attempt under Vichy to fashion a new generation of regimented, regenerated, and patriotic (as distinct from nationalist) Indochinese youngsters. A 1942 French manual for provincial Vietnamese youth leaders admonished them to “call on the rich folklore of your country. Rediscover beautiful traditions, original customs, etc. . . . Revive the memory of great events that fill your histories.”

Meanwhile, a June 1943 lecture by the French doctor P. Huard, directed at both French and Indochinese youngsters, asked the critical question “What is a nation?” This piece cited Napoléon’s axiom that the “love of one’s nation is the credo of civilized man,” then compared Southeast Asian and European forms of nationalism—the first supposedly predicated on Confucian laws, the second on emotion rather than fidelity. In the climate of 1943, this piece very clearly tried to draw parallels between French and Indochinese varieties of nationalism, on the one hand, while stressing the place of loyalty in Southeast Asian societies, on the other.

At the elite cadre indoctrination and regimentation camp known as the ESCJIC (Ecole Supérieure des Cadres de Jeunesse de l’Indochine), young notables were urged to venerate their patrie, be it Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia. On the occasion of Governor Decoux’s visit to the school on July 8, 1943, a Laotian student named Khamsi sang a piece he had composed:

The limits of Laos are wide indeed, its name Lan Xuang was once famous. Be they from the north or the south, its inhabitants are of the same race. All are Lao. Oh, compatriots, you have always protected one another. Never say that there are peoples of the north, peoples of the south. . . . We are all of the same blood, we all descend from the same ancestors, we must love one another for life. Friends, help us unite our bodies and spirits. Quick, quick, rush to defend the Lao race. Quick, quick, arise, help us preserve ourselves from misfortune, that the Lao people might continue to live. Sacrifice yourselves, life and soul. We are virile men, we must accept dying.

105 Commissariat général à l’éducation physique, aux sports et à la jeunesse, Premières tâches du chef de jeunesse provincial, Hanoi, Oct. 1942, 12. My thanks to David Del Testa for drawing this document to my attention.

for our country. And we will know how to spill our blood so that our
nation may be prosperous and glorious.\textsuperscript{107}

Of course, this performance must be placed in context. French colonial
authorities were preoccupied with Thai designs on southern Laos, and
this fervent nationalist, essentialist, and unitary rhetoric no doubt com-
forted them in the same manner as “controlled” Vietnamese nationalism
seemed to counter Japanese designs.\textsuperscript{108} Nevertheless, the equally, if
not more, powerful and portentous nationalist message was very likely
lost on both Decoux and the camp’s authorities, who saw in it an exal-
tation of virility, self-sacrifice, racialism, and patriotism—precisely the
values lauded by Pétain.

Another crucial dimension of Decoux’s youth “reculturation” pol-
icy involved practical self-discovery, a process based partly on the scout
blueprint and bearing a distinct “National Revolutionary” stamp. Thus
the youngster at ESCJIC was expected to scour the countryside, staking
out his personal trajectory toward national consciousness: “One sees
[ESCJIC students] wandering among fishermen, trudging through the
mud, surrounded by vermin in remote villages; . . . among the brick
makers; further on among the Chams, with the Moïs, among the peas-
ants of the delta, among the lumberjacks in the forests. Everywhere they
ask questions, they investigate, they improve their understanding of the
country.”\textsuperscript{109} This same spirit (minus the rodents) was evident in another
ESCJIC hymn:

\begin{quote}
We will go to all the towns,
All the mountains and rice fields
With a valiant heart, and proud soul,
Everywhere without hesitation
Preaching our ideal
To the youth of Indochina.
Behind the Marshal
We will be his linh [soldiers/spirit].\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

Very quickly, however, French sources show a terrified awareness
that this program could backfire when applied to Southeast Asia. The
Vietnamese scout movement, which the French had encouraged in

\textsuperscript{107} AMB, Fonds Decoux, box 3, “En l’honneur de la visite de l’Amiral Decoux, à l’École
supérieure des cadres de jeunesse de l’Indochine.”

\textsuperscript{108} The oneness of northern and southern Laos was an important theme running through
Vichyite propaganda throughout Laos; Ivarsson, “Bringing Laos into Existence,” 105.

\textsuperscript{109} Captain Vaziaga, “L’Indochine en marche: Les écoles de cadres de jeunesse,” Indochine,
hebdomadaire illustré, July 1, 1943, 10.

\textsuperscript{110} AMB, Fonds Decoux, box 2, “L’Indochine au travail.”
Indochina throughout the 1930s and 1940s, took full advantage of the reductionist turn of 1940 to dispense an unequivocally nationalist message. In July 1942, at a summer scout camp for Vietnamese university students established at Tuong Mai, Ducoroy’s officials noted with concern: “On July 26, Mr. Charton, director of education, and Mr. Lohenet, head of the office of sports of the résidence supérieure, inspected the Tuong Mai camp and were welcomed by the law student Duong Duc Hien, who delivered a speech in which he showed nationalist sentiments. I should remind you that Duong Duc Hien was once affiliated with the ‘Dai Viet Dan Chinh’ (Le Grand Annam démocratique), although he played no major role in it.” Another French report from August 1942 reveals a sudden realization that “were the[se] Indochinese youth movements not adroitly steered and controlled, they would be prone to deviate away from the imperial spirit and toward pure nationalism.” By 1943 the colonial police took stock of how badly Ducoroy’s programs had backfired. The Saigon police reported with some distress in July 1943 that “an informant to the special police of Saigon has drawn our attention to the fact that certain songs such as ‘Tran Bach Dang,’ ‘Trung Trac,’ and others, sung everywhere by members of youth leagues, with the approval of the [colonial] authorities, have awakened patriotic sentiments among the masses. It is only normal that the Annamites should feel pride on hearing such songs, which remind them of their heroes and their history.” Three months later, the Saigon police recorded yet more proof that Vichy’s youth policies had bred nationalism: “Our police services are investigating the conditions which led Scout movements in Cochinchina to sing a chant imbued with nationalism, titled ‘The Soul of the Soldier on the Field of Honor.’” Pierre Brocheux has shown how in one instance, in Hue in 1945, a scout team reinvented itself as a Communist youth vanguard. Elsewhere, Brocheux cites the example of Le Huu Phuoc, explaining how his famous Viet Minh youth song had first been composed as an ode to France, then to Indochina during the Decoux era, and finally to Vietnam.

111 See Marr, Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 80.
112 CAOM, RSTNF, 6237.
113 Ibid.
114 “The Battle of Bach Dang.”
115 A song dedicated to the eldest Trung sister.
116 CAOM Conseiller Politique du Haut Commissariat, Cochinchine, Rapport mensuel, Sûreté intérieure, report for the period from June 16 to July 15, 1943, 21.
117 Ibid, report from Nov. 16 to Dec. 15, 1943.
119 Pierre Brocheux and Agathe Larcher, “Une adolescence indochinoise,” in Nicolas Ban-
For his part, Marr gives the example of Dalat, where some hundred members of Vichy’s youth movements and thirty-two scouts fused with Communist party members to form a revolutionary nucleus. With the benefit of hindsight, a post-Vichy French report established a direct connection between Vichyite institutions and their Communist successors: the Communist youth and sports movement stemming out of the Chantiers de la Jeunesse, the avant-garde youth movement arising out of the ESCJIC, and a host of Communist cadres trained at other Pétainist institutions. It is admittedly harder to discern the precise influence of Vichy’s ideology on the Viet Minh Left than on the myriad of traditionalist, conservative, or ultraconservative constituencies, for one must naturally account for the respective influences of both Maoism and Stalinism on the postwar Viet Minh. Nevertheless, the models for everything from stadiums to exercise regimens, campsites, and methods of physical education that were outlined by Ducoroy’s youth and sport agency certainly appear to have spilled over onto the Communist youth vanguard.

My effort to elucidate the moment of disentanglement shows how at the very time when indigenous nationalist and imperial national cultures were untethered, they were also construed by ultraconservatives on both sides as being at their closest. I would not presume to cover the myriad ways in which this ultraconservative cross-fertilization spilled over into the postcolonial era (and onto both Vietnam), from the borrowing of a Vichyite youth hymn as the musical score to South Vietnam’s national anthem to the widespread use of the Vichy regimentation camp as a blueprint for Viet Minh cadre schools. More modestly, however, I might posit that these particular readings of “Vietnamese-ness,” “Laoness,” and “Khmerity” call to mind other instances in which colonial stereotypes were reinscribed into founding myths. To quote Said, “In post-colonial national states, the liabilities of such essences as the Celtic spirit, négritude, or Islam are clear: they have much to do not only with the native manipulators, who also use them to cover up contemporary faults, corruptions, tyrannies, but also with the embattled imperial contexts out of which they came and in which they were felt

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121 SHM, 10 H 78, dossier on “the Japanese occupation, and political life in Indochina, 1940–1945,” 13.
122 These blueprints can be found in carton 10 of Decoux’s personal correspondence at the AMB.
to be necessary.” At its most provocative, then, my argument suggests that such essences conjured up by nationalist anticolonial movements not only operate on a similar discursive register as but actually borrow from integralist, xenophobic, European ultranationalism. But more was at work in wartime Indochina than merely recycling and reconfiguring a set of reductionist identities. Much as Indonesian president Sukarno would later, to the amazement of onlookers, sing the praises of Adolf Hitler as a stalwart of nationalism, so did Vichy ideology serve as a convenient and ultimately disposable nationalist referent or foil for Indochinese nationalists. Here, French, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian histories became eminently usable pasts.

124 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 16.