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# INDIGENIZING COLONIAL MODERNITY IN *NAM BỘ*

 Philip Taylor

## *De-Colonizing Southern Vietnam's Modern History*

The Vietnamese economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s were accompanied by a number of significant reversals among state social scientists writing on the legacy of pre-socialist alternatives in southern Vietnam. After the failed attempt to carry the momentum of military victory into the project of post-war economic development, Vietnam's communist leaders identified "voluntarism" and lack of attention to "objective conditions" as the key weaknesses of their economic unification policies. To revitalize the project of constructing socialism, social science researchers were charged with re-inventorying the distinctive attributes which the area of Vietnam below the 17th parallel, could contribute to the nation's reforms.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of this commentary were the reversals on the meaning of the US era. Shortly after unification, it had been argued that the impact of US policy in the territory administered by the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) had impeded modernization, making the effects of French colonialism pale into insignificance:

No-one underestimates the harmful effects of neocolonialist culture. Twenty years of US devastation created consequences arguably ten times more serious than those of one hundred years of French colonialism.<sup>1</sup>

By the end of the next decade, the historical significance of the US impact, while still considered momentous, had been revalorized:

The socio-economic complexion of the regions of South Vietnam did not undergo change worth mentioning from the feudal regime (*chế độ phong kiến*) to the French colonial era. However, the situation changed after 1954, when US policy brought South Vietnam into the orbit of capitalism (*chủ nghĩa tư bản*) of which America was the leader.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Trần Quang, "Vài suy nghĩ về tàn dư văn hóa thực dân mới ở Miền Nam hiện nay" [Reflections on the vestiges of neo-colonial culture in the South today], *Văn Hóa Nghệ Thuật* (1976): 12.

<sup>2</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, "Một số đặc điểm xuất phát của Miền Nam đi lên chủ nghĩa xã hội" [Some starting points of the South on its way to socialism], in Nguyễn Quang Vinh et al., eds, *Miền Nam trong sự nghiệp đổi mới của cả nước* [South Vietnam and the nation's enterprise of Renovation] (Hà Chí Minh City: SocialSciencesPublishingHouse, 1990), p.26.

- <sup>3</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình et al., “Về cơ cấu xã hội và chính sách xã hội ở Nam Bộ” [On social structure and social policy in Southern Vietnam], *Tạp Chí Khoa Học Xã Hội* 7 (1991): 28–40.
- <sup>4</sup> Nguyễn Thu Sa, “Về nhân vật trung tâm ở nông thôn Nam Bộ: người trung nông” [On the main character in rural Nam Bộ: the middle peasant], *Tạp Chí Khoa Học Xã Hội* 9 (1991): 33.
- <sup>5</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, “Some starting points of the South on its way to socialism,” pp.24–8.
- <sup>6</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Viên, “The Mekong delta: a socio-historical survey,” in Nguyễn Khắc Viên, *Southern Vietnam 1975–1985* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1985), pp.338–61.
- <sup>7</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, “Some starting points of the South on its way to socialism,” p.27.
- <sup>8</sup> Read as “*Nam Bộ*.”
- <sup>9</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, “Some starting points of the South on its way to socialism,” p.27 (emphasis in the original).
- <sup>10</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, “On social structure and social policy in *Nam Bộ*”; Nguyễn Thu Sa, “On the main character in rural *Nam Bộ*: the middle peasant.”

Much of this revisionist commentary, particularly that issuing from the Hồ Chí Minh City Institute of Social Science, was illustrated by reference to *Nam Bộ*, formerly Cochinchina, the southernmost extremity of the country. Nguyễn Công Bình and others, in illustrating the commodification of agriculture and class transformations that had occurred during Republican times, focused on *Nam Bộ*,<sup>3</sup> as did Nguyễn Thu Sa in discussing the emergence of the “middle peasant” in the same period.<sup>4</sup> In a piece acknowledging US-era developments below the 17th parallel, Nguyễn Công Bình’s illustrations almost all referred to changes in the geographically more restricted “*Nam Bộ*” region.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, in asserting that the Republican-era was witness to transformations in the “Mekong delta,” Nguyễn Khắc Viên<sup>6</sup> and Nguyễn Công Bình,<sup>7</sup> extended the Mekong delta’s denotation to encompass former Saigon, enabling favourable comparison between the “South” (*Nam Bộ*) and the “Centre” and “North.”

Constant references to the entity of *Nam Bộ* as the site of such developments is intriguing. The 1955–75 RVN State had administered all territory below the 17th parallel, uniting the former colony of Cochinchina with the southern half of the former colonial protectorate of Annam. The Republic’s first president, Ngô Đình Diệm, had moved to centralize national power in Saigon, by neutralizing the politico-religious sects based in the Mekong delta and by vigorously attacking Cochinchinese regionalism. Although the projection of central power had been notoriously unsuccessful, the Republic of Vietnam’s socio-economic policies had been intended for extension throughout the area south of the 17th parallel. While the confinement of “modernization” to the region of *Nam Bộ* may have been an unintended consequence of the sum of US and RVN nation-building endeavours, surely the reason for this was worthy of consideration. For instance, assuming such post-colonial regional differentiation had indeed occurred, one might hypothesize that the legacies of the colonial era would have been germane to this process. As *Nam Bộ* had been the site of the most prolonged and intensive development in French Indochina, one might have expected revisionists to have had much to say about the legacies of the colonial period.

However, commentators downplayed the impact of the colonial era. Referring to the impact of US policies on class relations in the Mekong delta,<sup>8</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình conceptualized 1954 as marking a transition from feudalism:

The commodity economy (*nền kinh tế hàng hóa*) spread from Saigon and other cities, making its influence felt in rural regions. The Mekong delta experienced the most distinct changes. *It transformed from a region of feudal landowners (địa chủ phong kiến), to one where the middle peasant held sway.*<sup>9</sup>

In some discussions of US-era developments in *Nam Bộ*, the impact of colonialism was not even mentioned.<sup>10</sup> In others, French colonialism was mentioned, but only for its significance to be tersely discounted:

If the now distant period of French colonialism can be dismissed as a thing

of the past, the capitalist system introduced as a result of US involvement had major consequences.<sup>11</sup>

Such curiously muted interest in or dismissal of the colonial era suggests the *Đổi Mới* era's social scientific re-examination of southern Vietnam to have been limited to qualifying, or rescinding, post-war blanket dismissals of the RVN's historical achievements. Re-evaluation of southern Vietnam's distinct history appeared restricted to the recuperation of "neo-colonial poisons" and their transformation into "legacies of modernization." The favourable assessments marking this discourse contrasted with a near complete silence on the colonial period.

### *Post-War Assertions of Unity*

During the war years, nothing in official commentary on Vietnamese identity had occurred with more mantra-like frequency than the assertion that Vietnam was an ancient unity, the Vietnamese people one people. The division of the country into North/South or North/Centre/South were perfidious foreign strategies of domination imposed on the indivisible integrity of the Vietnamese nation by foreign powers.<sup>12</sup> The entity Cochinchina was the invidious creation of the colonial period. Carved off from the nation and ruled directly as a colony, it represented the earliest breach of Vietnam's national integrity. Given over to capitalist export agriculture and large rubber and rice estates, it represented the region where the most oppressive exploitation and most profound alienation from traditional modes of life had taken place.<sup>13</sup> It had taken almost a century of struggle to return Cochinchina to the national fold: the colony's existence annulled by the declaration of Independence from France in 1945.

In 1976, formal unification gave Hanoi effective administrative control over territory which it had always claimed as part of its jurisdiction. As had been the intention of the Republican government, central policy was to apply homogeneously over the entire country. No validity was accorded to regional legacies bequeathed by recent history. Indeed, a mood of militant unity prevailed. The regime's approach towards regional difference could be characterized as one of elimination.<sup>14</sup> There was no suggestion that the demise of the RVN might revive the colonial entity of Cochinchina. References to this region, emerging after 1976, stressed its conformity to, or exemplification of the supposedly national traits of heroism, patriotism, love of national unity, collectivist orientation and embrace of socialism. The topic of region was broached in order to demolish the notion of regional differences, or attack the harmful, alien accretions of recent origin.

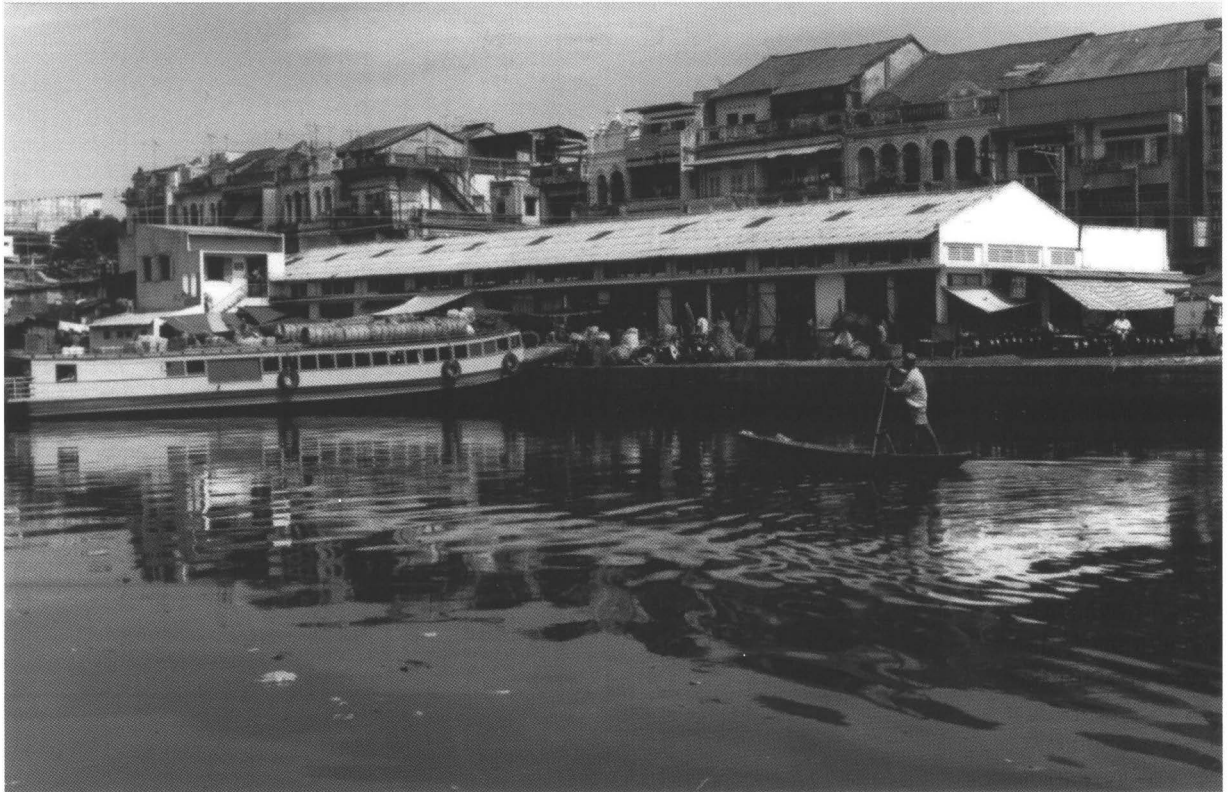
For example, in 1977, the Party's principal foreign spokesman Nguyễn Khắc Viên wrote about a recent journey made to the Mekong delta, his first ever to a region which he had dreamed about as a schoolboy. Entitled "From One Delta to Another," it began by describing the striking differences in

<sup>11</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Nguyễn, "Economic renovation in southern Vietnam: challenges – responses – prospects," in Dean K. Forbes et al., eds, *Đổi Mới: Vietnam's Renovation policy and performance*, Monograph 14 (Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Australian National University, 1991), p.35.

<sup>12</sup> The French had divided Vietnam into three, comprising a colony—Cochinchina—and the two protectorates of Annam and Tonkin, and had dealt with these as separate countries grouped along with Laos and Cambodia within an entirely new entity called the French Indochinese Union.

<sup>13</sup> The community of foreign scholars of Vietnam have tended to view Cochinchina as the part of Vietnam which incurred the greatest rupture with precolonial feudal, communal and subsistence patterns, due to the development there of capitalist export-agriculture, which entrenched commodity relations far more deeply than in the rest of the former kingdom. David Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial 1920–1945* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1981), p.4; Guy Gran, "Vietnam and the capitalist route to modernity: village Cochinchina 1880–1940," PhD diss. (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> For example, there was no attempt to manage the transformation of two Vietnams into one through temporary administrative arrangements. Hopes nurtured by southern militants for the survival of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam as a transitional entity pending complete unification at a later date were dashed in 1976 when the SRVN was declared with a unified centralized administration based in Hanoi. See Trương Như Tảng, *A Vietcong memoir* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace & Jovanovitch, 1985), p.285. From that date, central policy was directed towards the construction of the new socialist person and the elimination of the vestiges of the old society, which were declared recent impositions of an illegitimate, alien nature.



**Figure 1**  
*Docks in District Five, principal terminus for the riverine trade between Hồ Chí Minh City and the Mekong delta (all photographs by the author)*

geology, hydrography and human ecology he had noticed between the northern and southern deltas.<sup>15</sup> Yet the author was quickly reminded of the unity of these deltas' human history. He reported having found people wanting to talk about the Tây Sơn rebels' eighteenth-century victory against the Siamese invaders, the anti-colonial struggle, the anti-US war of resistance.<sup>16</sup> He had visited various "bases of our resistance": Ấp Bắc, Bến Tre and the U Minh forest.<sup>17</sup> In Bến Tre he had met an indomitable heroine who reminded him of another female revolutionary he was acquainted with in the North. He described the various patriots and heroes of "resistance struggles against foreign aggression" produced by the Mekong delta. He discussed the region's history of economic exploitation by French colonialists and the Americans and found that only since liberation had the region begun to achieve real development by returning to the nation's "millenary tradition" of collective work practices. He described people's joy at receiving a visitor from Hanoi. "They peppered us with questions about the North, about Uncle Ho."<sup>18</sup>

In a 1982 article, Trần Văn Giàu, influential historian and head of the *Nam Bộ* chapter of the Indochinese Communist Party during the colonial era, evoked another post-war journey, perhaps an allusion to his own return south after having spent the war years in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Giàu observed that for one who had been away from the region for a period

<sup>15</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Viên, "From one delta to another," in idem, *Southern Vietnam 1975–1985* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), pp.279–325.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.284.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp.288–307.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.303.



of thirty years, the rural areas of *Nam Bộ* had become commercialized (*thương mại hoá*), and, as a result, its rural inhabitants had become selfish and money-oriented. These developments were attributed to the US commodity aid program:

Commercial trade has created a mindset of chasing after selfish interests (*chạy theo lợi ích ích kỷ*) that smallholders and tenants had scarcely known before. ... The profit motive (*lợi ích*) has advanced, the ethic of loyalty (*vinh nghĩa*), declined. ... A person returning to the *Nam Bộ* countryside after an absence of some thirty years cannot avoid a feeling of grief when seeing this phenomenon of psychological deterioration (*tâm lý suy đồi*).<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, he asserted resolutely,

At base, the southern (*Nam Bộ*) peasant character retains the traditional qualities that neither France nor the American-puppets could change or annul. They remain the people whose ancestors made the adventurous journey to the extreme South to settle, armed with ploughs and hoes, who four times helped the Tây Sơn defeat the Nguyễn feudalists, who countless times rose up against the French, ... who made the August 1945 Revolution, who fought for thirty long years under the leadership of the Party and who still to this day follow the Party, even despite the failings of individual Party members.<sup>20</sup>

### *Intimations of Indigenous Difference*

Giàu's essay appeared in a volume entitled *A Few Social Science Problems Concerning the Mekong Delta*, which published papers delivered at a 1981 conference held in Hồ Chí Minh City.<sup>21</sup> Among the contributors, fellow historian Huỳnh Lứa similarly used the opportunity of a conference on the Mekong delta to discuss the broader region of *Nam Bộ*. Describing the pioneering exploitation of *Nam Bộ* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Huỳnh Lứa addressed the relevance of traditional Vietnamese values in the new southern environment:

In this region, the traditional ethics of the Vietnamese farmer such as industriousness, patience, the endurance of difficulties, and the creative application of the experience of traditional wet rice agriculture, were comprehensively brought into play and yielded substantial results.<sup>22</sup>

In areas of recent arrival, Vietnamese migrants lived together in groups, voluntarily settling in hamlets, because village organization was the habitual infrastructural base of Vietnamese farmers—their traditions of unity, mutual assistance and mutual love were ancient legacies. Moreover, in a new land, with dense jungles full of wild beasts, deep rivers full of crocodiles, and an unfamiliar climate, they had to co-operate with each other, gather together and form hamlets, to create the conditions to help each other open the land, fight disease and resist natural disasters and wild animals.<sup>23</sup>

Huỳnh Lứa also made reference to the existence of extensive market relations in the Đồng Nai–Gia Định region (used interchangeably with *Nam Bộ* in the article) during this era:

<sup>19</sup> Trần Văn Giàu, “Mấy đặc tính của nông dân đồng bằng sông Cửu Long–Đồng Nai” [Some features of the Mekong–Đồng Nai peasants], in Nguyễn Khánh Toàn et al., eds., *Một số vấn đề khoa học xã hội về đồng bằng sông Cửu long* [A few social science problems concerning the Mekong delta] (Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1982), p.206.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, *A few social science problems concerning the Mekong Delta*.

<sup>22</sup> Huỳnh Lứa, “Công cuộc khai phá vùng Đồng Nai–Gia Định trong thế kỷ 17–18” [Settlement of the Đồng Nai–Gia Định region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries], in Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, *ibid.*, p.87.

<sup>23</sup> Huỳnh Lứa, “Settlement of the Đồng Nai–Gia Định region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” p.87.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.93.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.94.

Based on a developing agriculture, the Đồng Nai–Gia Định region early on enjoyed a thriving commerce (*một nền thương nghiệp phồn vinh*) and a developed commodity economy linked with an extensive market.<sup>24</sup>

He described such markets as “springing up,” with “many centres of international commerce,” the development of handicraft industries, the emergence of a division of labour. He observed that the development of a commodity economy stimulated the production of rice. Providing a counter-point to Trần Văn Giàu’s commentary on the deleterious effects of US aid on the *Nam Bộ* peasant personality, this author saw the existence of a commodity economy as consistent with the maintenance of traditional values, a point he stressed at the conclusion of his piece:

Here, it must be emphasized, one of the factors of decisive importance *vis-à-vis* the success [of the *Nam Bộ* settlers] was their spirit of close mutual affection and assistance, the realization of communal strength, the exchange of lessons between the members of the Vietnamese community living and working here.<sup>25</sup>

The divergent interpretations of these two historians came at a time when the central government’s post-war socialist reform policies were under serious challenge in Hồ Chí Minh City and the Mekong delta. During the late seventies, rural collectivization, the nationalization of commerce and other state-sponsored activity such as the establishment of “new economic zones” in inhospitable regions had been very unsuccessful. Exhortations to sacrifice immediate individual benefits for future collective prosperity and maintain the spirit of struggle animating military resistance had failed to mobilize the population around the Party’s objectives. There had been widespread non-compliance in collectivization in the Mekong delta and a marked failure to secure state control of commerce in Hồ Chí Minh City. In response, the Party had voiced self-criticisms of the drastic administrative measures it had initially applied to nationalize bourgeois commerce in Hồ Chí Minh City. At the time this conference was held, goals such as the complete nationalization of exchange functions and collectivization of the Mekong delta remained central policy, however the means to achieving them were under reconsideration. Private commerce was being allowed in certain commodities, if done legally and in an orderly manner and expectations with regard to collectivization had been re-adjusted. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive reconsideration of the central government’s approach to the economy was brewing. Southern-based Party leaders who presided over the recalcitrant southern Vietnamese metropolis and its surrounding provinces showed little capacity or enthusiasm for forcing it to yield to Hanoi’s vision. Wholesale non-realization of socialist objectives in the country’s most economically dynamic region was subtly evolving into an alternative, if *de facto*, national approach.

In Huỳnh Lứa’s piece can be found a reassessment of commodity trade, from recent foreign imposition to deep-seated local institution. A further development came in Nguyễn Khắc Viện’s “Socio-historical study of the Mekong delta,” which summarized the results of this conference on the

Mekong delta for foreign consumption. Nguyễn Khắc Viên argued that key indigenous, not foreign-imposed characteristics set the Mekong delta apart from Vietnam's "Centre" and "North." In a piece offering qualified recognition that the US had promoted modernization in the Mekong delta, he alluded to the region's even older legacy of difference. Viên wrote that on the eve of French colonization of Vietnam:

While remaining essentially Vietnamese, the Mekong delta peasant had preserved a spirit of pioneering, even of adventure. He was always ready to seek new horizons, to fight and if need be, to sacrifice his life to defend his rights. Living on a fertile land, he was less thrifty, less mindful of the future than his relatives in the North and the Centre and generously extended hospitality to all.<sup>26</sup>

This represented one of the first references to authentic (as opposed to foreign-imposed) regional differences within Vietnam in official literature. Given the tone of militant invalidation that had marked previous commentary on regional differences, including many writings by this same author, his reference to pre-colonial regional personality differences, firmly grounded, moreover, in environmental factors, was noteworthy.

Viên's Mekong delta connoted *Nam Bộ*, formerly the colonial entity Cochinchina. This allowed him to smuggle in the city of Saigon as part of the region. Saigon featured explicitly in his portrait of the region through its integrative role as a market hub for Mekong delta peasants:

The peasants were able to exploit the natural resources found in that virgin land: fish, shrimp, rushes, water palms, and sell the products in less-favoured regions, or merchants could buy and resell them in Gia Định, which later became Saigon city. From Bến Nghé port in the same locality, the products were sent to provinces in the centre and the north or exported.<sup>27</sup>

This account of the role of Saigon as a commercial hub supplemented his view of the region's distinctiveness, recasting a feature that had previously been regarded as an alien implantation (the urban commodity economy) as a pre-colonial tradition. Flagging the notion of this region as a distinct entity, whose variance with national patterns was not the effect of foreign influence, Viên described a Mekong delta on the threshold of colonization as having already developed distinctive characteristics—a significant step away from the view of regionalism as the invidious product of colonial divide-and-rule strategies.

**Figure 2**

*Mekong delta rice in Vĩnh Long, en route to the world*



<sup>26</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Viên, "The Mekong delta: a socio-historical survey," p.345, a 1985 publication.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.344.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.349.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.352.

Nguyễn Khắc Viên's treatment of the colonial era made this even clearer. The "socio-historical" impact of French colonization was reduced to two consequences—the exacerbation of rural class divisions and the colonial cultivation of a Chinese compradore class.<sup>28</sup> Even so, as he observed, these developments were negated by the Communist Party's land reforms, the societal modernization which he conceded occurred in the late RVN period and the anti-compradore campaigns of the socialist regime.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the French colonial impact in southern Vietnam, in his view, was both limited and reversible. The regional characteristics that had endured were of pre-colonial origin.

Such a view, emerging as it did in the early eighties may be linked to the policy adjustments of that time, but it remained more or less undeveloped until the end of the decade. Nguyễn Khắc Viên's essay had broached the issue of southern regional difference as an indigenous phenomenon; by 1989 the concept had become a widespread staple in published discussion.

### Pre-Colonial Modernity

In a volume collecting papers presented at a 1989 conference in Hồ Chí Minh City, entitled "South Vietnam in the Country's Renovation Task," Nguyễn Công Bình, then director of the Hồ Chí Minh City Institute of Social Sciences, contributed a "historical perspective" on a number of socio-economic characteristics of *Nam Bộ*. The main point he sought to establish was that:

A commodity economy (*nền kinh tế hàng hóa*) developed early in *Nam Bộ*. It pushed forward the exploitation of a diverse and often-changing nature, to develop production and expand international commerce.<sup>30</sup>

On the face of it, this observation merely confirmed a view shared by Western social scientists of diverse theoretical orientations, that the area established as the French colony of Cochinchina had experienced an earlier and more extensive capitalist transformation than the rest of the country.<sup>31</sup> And yet, by "early," Bình meant at least 1822 (more than forty years prior to French conquest of the region) during the reign of the Minh Mang Emperor. The report *Gia Định Thành Tông Chí* 嘉定城道志, compiled in this year by the Sino-Vietnamese mandarin Trịnh Hoài Đức 鄭懷德, was mined by Bình for evidence of the importance of the pre-colonial commodity economy in the southern region:

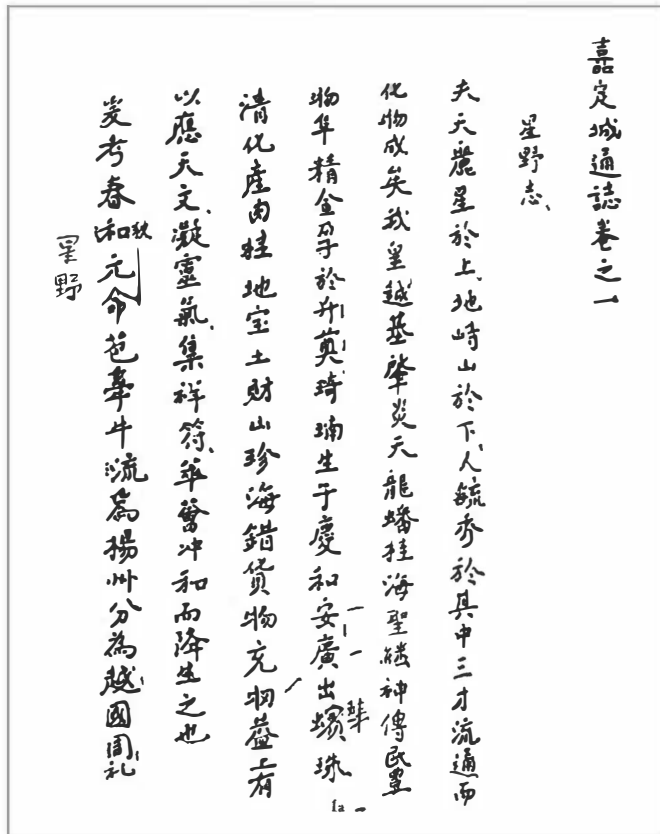


Figure 3

Opening page of *Gia Định Thành Tông Chí*, a report on the region of Southern Vietnam, presented to the Minh Mang Emperor in the early years of his reign by its author, a Sino-Vietnamese scholar and native to the region, Trịnh Hoài Đức (Saigon: Nha Văn Hóa Phủ Quốc Vụ Khanh Đặc Trách Văn Hóa, 1972)

The greatest achievement, serving as the motor of economic, social and cultural development in South Vietnam<sup>32</sup> was the development of a commodity economy. The rice market stretched from Gia Định to Thuận Hóa. Quite a large stratum of merchants was formed. Along with this were many famous entrepôts: Cù Lao Phố (Biên Hòa), Bãi Xầu (Mỹ Xuyên, Sóc Trăng), Hà Tiên, Mỹ Tho town market and Saigon—a commercial hub “unparalleled throughout the entire country” (*Gia Định Thành Tông Chí*).<sup>33</sup>

Trịnh Hoài Đức’s report was submitted to the monarch of the Nguyễn Dynasty who had been most instrumental in the establishment of centralized administrative control over southern Vietnam. Nguyễn Công Bình included this dynasty “among those former regimes” which had:

paid attention to exploiting the unique natural features of this new region, with policies towards it of benefit to the regime, while at the same time *further accentuating the particular socio-economic features of this region*, above all its characteristics of *an agricultural commodity economy*.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly Bình placed the existence of a commodity economy prior to the founding of the Nguyễn dynasty (in 1802), whose economic contribution was therefore merely one of “further accentuating” what he deemed to be a pre-existing trait of the region.

This entailed quite significant departures from prevailing official notions on pre-colonial Vietnam. The first of these notions might be glossed as the accusation that the French conquest of Vietnam had been abetted by the impotence of the “feudal” Nguyễn dynasty. That regime’s Neo-Confucian ideology, formalism, adherence to “outmoded traditions” and rejection of new ideas and practices had supposedly prevented a clear assessment of and effective response to, the emergent threat of European expansion. The country had become feeble and vulnerable to conquest.<sup>35</sup> Arguably, the enervating effects of this court ideology implied strong and unified control over the country, otherwise such effects could not have been realized. Accusing the Nguyễn dynasty of sinking the country into stagnation entailed a possibly unintended compliment, that it possessed the capacity to do so.

Yet Bình’s comments involved a substantial revision of this view. He described socio-economic traits such as the commodity economy as having predated, continued in tandem with and outlasted the Nguyễn regime. The commodity economy was depicted as existing independently of any one regime, acting as “motor of economic, social and cultural development.”<sup>36</sup> He thus dissented from the view that the commodity economy was a “modern” imposition of French colonialism, much less an “anti-modern” or “enslaving” effect of US neo-colonialism. Placing its evolution in pre-colonial times, he furthermore maintained its independence of the Nguyễn court. In doing so he was rather less complimentary about the Nguyễn court’s relevance to pre-colonial Vietnam than some of its previous critics, for he argued that the commodity economy had formed a parallel and independent locus of social development, which had continued to act dynamically throughout its reign.

Having questioned the homogeneity of pre-colonial Vietnam, arguing for

<sup>30</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, “Some starting points of the South on its way to socialism,” p.22.

<sup>31</sup> Guy Gran, *Vietnam and the capitalist route to modernity: village Cochinchina 1880–1940*; Samuel Popkin, *The rational peasant* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1979); James C. Scott, *The moral economy of the peasant: rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976); Martin Murray, *The development of capitalism in colonial Indochina 1870–1940* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1980).

<sup>32</sup> At this point, Bình used the term ‘*Miền Nam*’ which I have translated as ‘South Vietnam’. However, as the content and the context show, he was referring to the more limited region which he referred to elsewhere as *Nam Bộ*.

<sup>33</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, “Some starting points of the South on its way to socialism,” p.23.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* (emphases in the original).

<sup>35</sup> Trần Văn Giàu, *Hệ ý thức phong kiến: và sự thất bại của nó trước các nhiệm vụ lịch sử* [Feudal ideology and its failure in the face of historical responsibilities] (Hà Chí Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, “Some starting points of the South on its way to socialism,” p.23.

<sup>37</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, “On social structure and social policy in Southern Vietnam,” p.28.

the early differentiation of its political and “socio-economic” domains, Binh’s second departure from historiographical orthodoxy was to question the pre-colonial unity of the country. The colonial entity of Cochinchina had been superimposed over a pre-existing pre-colonial entity, which Binh referred to variously as “*Nam Bộ*,” “the Six Provinces” (*Lục Tỉnh*) and “*Gia Định*.” In this region had obtained “unique natural features” and, compared to the rest of pre-colonial Vietnam, it was “new” and possessed “particular socio-economic features,” namely, a commodity economy, a substantial stratum of merchants, several significant trading ports and linkages with international trade routes. These features distinguished this region from the rest of pre-colonial Vietnam.

Such a point was emphasized the following year in a collectively authored contribution to the Social Sciences Review, “On social structure and social policy in *Nam Bộ*”:

*Nam Bộ*’s distinct social characteristics spring above all from its most important economic characteristic, that which drives its development: in *Nam Bộ*, a commodity economy emerged and developed early on [emphasis in original]. Commodified agriculture, ocean ports, trade with foreign nations, such is the portrait of *Nam Bộ* from its beginning (seventeenth–eighteenth century). Favourable natural conditions, a developed commodity economy and extensive international communications, attracted to the new region of *Nam Bộ* many communities of settlers, ethnic groups, religious shadings, cultural and civilizational currents. However, differences of settlement, ethnicity, religion, language and cultural activity did not proceed towards greater differentiation but rather dissolved (*giải tỏa*), linked (*liên kết*) and gathered (*tụ họp lại*), to form the *Nam Bộ* character (*cốt cách*).<sup>37</sup>

#### Figure 4

Being led into the “real southern Vietnam” by staff from the Hồ Chí Minh City Institute of Social Sciences and a Party official from Tiền Giang Province



Herein lay a distinct departure from the argument developed by Huỳnh Lứa a decade earlier. Huỳnh Lứa, using the same pre-colonial source *Gia Định Thành Tông Chí*, emphasized that no departures from traditional Vietnamese values had been entailed by Vietnamese settlement in this new land, despite the fact of living amidst the hustle and bustle of an international trading centre. Nguyễn Công Bình and his co-authors may as well have been describing a different region. Settlers to the new land had come from diverse origins and value relativity had been a premise of settlement. Values had subsequently changed and cultural differences had been effaced in this process, leading to the creation of a new and regionally-distinctive character. Another departure, not only from Huỳnh Lứa, but from many other Vietnamese historians of the pre-colonial Vietnamese southward migration, was these authors' emphasis on the pull factors motivating settlement: attraction to the favourable conditions of this commercial centre *versus* flight or expulsion from famine, poverty and warfare.

Bình's third departure from received wisdom on pre-colonial Vietnam was his assessment of the flexibility of the Nguyễn dynasty in recognizing and exploiting socio-economic trends and regional specificity. This had not only been of benefit to the regime but had been conducive to "further accentuating the particular socio-economic features of this region."<sup>38</sup> He argued that the court had acted responsively to the societal differentiation and regional diversity of pre-colonial times in a way that had profited the entire country:

The Nguyễn Dynasty, while capitulating in the face of the country's economic decline, did endeavour to find a way out by opening up new land. At the same time as preserving the system of state-owned land and village communal lands, it allowed *private rice fields* to develop in the six southern provinces. While pursuing a "closed-door policy," it still allowed the six provinces *extensive overseas trade*: "Gia Định is the regular commercial hub for several countries" (*Gia Định Thành Tông Chí*). The system of private ownership of rice fields, a division of labour in a variety of ecological regions and overseas trade allowed the Mekong delta to develop rapidly a commodity economy and soon become a rice granary for the whole country.<sup>39</sup>

This was positive commentary indeed for a regime whose backwardness and conservatism had long been blamed (not only by Communist critics) for the humiliating ease with which the French had been able to take possession of Vietnam. Moreover, albeit implicitly, a case was being made that the current regime had something to learn from the feudalists.

The Nguyễn Court had not been alone in tailoring policies of specific relevance to *Nam Bộ*, a point made in a collectively-authored article written the following year. The authors claimed that flexibility towards the region of *Nam Bộ* has been the hallmark of all previous regimes. Such policies had served both government and the region: the potential of the region was realized for the benefit of each regime and each regime's flexibility enhanced the region's distinctive character:

<sup>38</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, "Some starting points of the South on its way to socialism," p.23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24 (emphases in the original).

<sup>40</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, “On social structure and social policy in Southern Vietnam,” p.28.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

*Nam Bộ* is a piece of territory that cannot be detached from unified Vietnam, yet the region has distinctive economic, social and cultural features formed over history. All former regimes had policies for *Nam Bộ* to rapidly exploit the potential of this new region, each of which, as a result, augmented *Nam Bộ*'s distinctiveness.<sup>40</sup>

The implication was that the present regime could only benefit by continuing this tradition of recognizing and promoting the region's distinctiveness. Rather than see *Nam Bộ*'s distinctive identity as a invidious colonial era innovation to be eliminated, Binh and his fellow authors claimed it as an enduring quality that would best be maintained. Regimes had been rewarded in the past for just this.

Over three hundred years, *Nam Bộ*'s economy developed faster than the country's other regions. There were years of very rapid change, definitively transforming the face of *Nam Bộ*. At the first stage of exploitation, after only half a century of land clearing policies and development of private rice fields, *Nam Bộ* had become the rice region for the whole Southern region (Pierre Poivre, 1749). A decade after the first world war, from 1919 to 1929, under the system of great landlords and the digging of many canals, *Nam Bộ* rice and rubber were world famous. In the decade 1965–75, with the importation of machines, technology, and land reform, high-yield rice regions formed in the Mekong delta.<sup>41</sup>

Binh was not merely contributing new knowledge about the pre-colonial period, filling in gaps or oversights in the historical record. Rather, he was attacking a very persuasive schematization (through which history is made meaningful)—that is the dichotomization between a “modern” colonizing power and a “traditional” colonial possession. Binh subverted this dichotomy through appropriation. That which had previously been seen as colonial-era

### Figure 5

*Long-distance passenger boat terminus, Long Xuyên river port, Mekong delta*





innovations—regional divisions, commodity relations and a central state responsive to and furthering such complexity—were now regarded as features of an earlier era. Colonial “modernity” was anticipated by indigenous “tradition.” The role accorded to the colonizers in this view was to preside over, or at most, actively perpetuate processes already in full swing before their arrival.

### *Southern Vietnamese Individualism*

In a similar way, Hoàng Thiệu Khang’s contribution to the volume *South Vietnam in the Renovation Task* eroded the view of the category of the individual as a “modern” phenomenon, introduced to Vietnam from the West. His contention was that on the threshold of building socialism in Vietnam, attention had to be paid to the existence in *Nam Bộ* of a category of the person (*con người*) distinct from other regions of Vietnam—that of the individual (*cá nhân*).<sup>42</sup> However, this could not be seen as the residue of French or US capitalism. It had emerged in the distinctive historical conditions of the region.<sup>43</sup>

According to Khang, the origins of Southern Vietnamese individualism lay in the era of Vietnamese settlement of the uninhabited wastelands of the *Nam Bộ* plain.<sup>44</sup> The earliest settlers had formed small communities of mutual assistance in the face of the challenges of an untamed nature full of wild animals and marauding bandits.<sup>45</sup> Many of the settlers had fled an oppressive feudal regime, among these were Chinese refugees likewise fleeing the Qing takeover. Thus these early communities had been marked by a relative freedom from political constraint found in other regions. Khang described a process of “spontaneous group formation” (*kết hợp tự phát*) that is, groups formed in response to pressing need and bound by an “natural moral consciousness” rather than imposed “feudal values.” Each member had participated in such groups as a “free member” (*thành viên tự do*). Only later had political consolidation begun but even well into the administrative rationalization of the Nguyễn dynasty, the spontaneous nature of group membership had still been evident. Khang argued that strong traces of a notion of personhood deriving from these original “natural” communities were still evident today in the structure of the Southern Vietnamese personality:

The natural moral consciousness and degree of freedom in this personality structure (*cơ chế nhân cách*) offers us many explanations into the content of today’s Southern Vietnamese personhood, and the principles of group and individual formation.<sup>46</sup>

Another significant factor in the process of formation of a distinctive Southern Vietnamese personality structure had been the existence of commodity relations. Khang concurred with Bình’s account of the region’s pre-colonial economy:

<sup>42</sup> Some accounts of Vietnam’s encounter with the West, in the form of French colonialism, have cast it in terms of an clash between a “traditional” and a “modern” socio-cultural system with often drastic implications for traditional social relations and categories such as the person. See John McAlister and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and their revolution* (New York: Harper, 1970), pp.38, 95; and Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the lake: the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p.263. Such accounts assume the “premodern” Vietnamese to have moved in an undifferentiated Maussian world of roles, personages and masks. A world of communal solidarity is sketched, where individuals were subservient to the collective, children in lifelong debt to their parents and the living in debt to the dead. Women found recognition only through practice of the three obediences and the four virtues. Notions such as individual autonomy and self-responsibility were alien. One’s fortune was dependent on the virtue of the King, on the deeds of the extended family, living and dead, on one’s actions in past lives, on the whims of denizens of the densely-populated spirit world, on the movement of astrological bodies and on the geomantic context of one’s acts in both space and time.

<sup>43</sup> Hoàng Thiệu Khang, “Từ điểm xuất phát đi lên chủ nghĩa xã hội nhìn cơ chế nhân cách con người Miền Nam” [Embarking on socialism—regarding the Southern Vietnamese personality structure], in Nguyễn Quang Vinh, *South Vietnam and the nation’s enterprise of Renovation*, pp.307–20.

<sup>44</sup> This author used ‘*Miền Nam*’ and ‘*Nam Bộ*’ interchangeably, to refer to the region of southern Vietnam discussed in this chapter. Sơn Nam used ‘*Miền Nam*’ in the same way in his classic study of “southern” Vietnamese personhood: *Cá tính của Miền Nam* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa, 1992).

<sup>45</sup> Hoàng Thiệu Khang, “Embarking on socialism—regarding the Southern Vietnamese personality structure,” p.313.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.314.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.315.

Rice and cereal cultivation in Southern Vietnam developed rapidly, especially in the eighteenth century, to the extent that rice went from being adequate for subsistence to a surplus and transformed into a commodity.<sup>47</sup>

Also important had been the emergence of large and internationally significant export ports in the region:

It was thus that a commodity economy powerfully burst forth in the eighteenth century. This ensured that the economic relations pertaining at that time in Southern Vietnam bore the universal mark of global history.<sup>48</sup>

According to Khang, this had been a factor of profound significance in the formation of a distinctive Southern Vietnamese personhood. The region's participation in economic developments of a global nature

was sufficient to provide a basis for a new kind of consciousness—the consciousness of “I” (*tôi*) in its initial stages—to be closely followed by a consciousness of “I” based on the [colonial] capitalist relations which came later.<sup>49</sup>

He argued that the land clearing policies of the Nguyễn dynasty after 1802 had led to the emergence of sharp class divisions and a class of landlords for whom commodity values were of increased importance. In the hands of large landlords, rice had become increasingly valued as a commodity as had been the case for all sorts of handicrafts. This had led to the emergence of a significant class of merchants who had become an important social force—able to shape not only economic relations but the consciousness and lifestyle of the whole of society in the region.<sup>50</sup>

Finally and briefly, Khang registered the influence of Western capitalist notions of the individual on the shaping of southern Vietnamese personhood.

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**Figure 6**

Nam Bộ rice on the riverine highway of the Mekong delta



Yet he was at pains to stress the unique trajectory of the formation of the Southern Vietnamese “I” through this latter period, recalling its origins in the “free membership” of the spontaneous groupings of the early pioneers:

From an innocent and essential quality, the Southern Vietnamese person entered into a commodity ideology and subsequently into a capitalist ideology ... From an innocent quality the Southern Vietnamese person stepped into individualist consciousness. And because of this step, such individuality retains its innocence and natural quality—certainly not the devious individualism of a retrograde kind of capitalism.<sup>51</sup>

In this account, Khang appeared to write colonial and neo-colonial influences out of his portrayal of South Vietnamese individualism. A commodity economy had left its mark in the development of a form of possessive individualism—but this was a process emerging and achieving consolidation in pre-colonial times. The effects of a colonialist and capitalist individualist ideology was noted and yet its influence was mediated by an “innocent” and “natural” individualism surviving from the earliest days of Vietnamese settlement. For Khang, southern Vietnamese individuality was an indigenous category of personhood, yet one considerably removed from typical renditions of traditional Vietnamese personhood.<sup>52</sup>

### Nam Bộ Culture

A particularly prolific author and one who perhaps more than any other writer in the post-war era promoted the notion of Southern Vietnam (*Nam Bộ*) as a distinct entity, was the Hồ Chí Minh City-based folklorist, Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng. His writings and films ranged over a remarkable variety of topics including folktales, sayings and other folk usages, various genres of ritual theatre and music, *cải lương* opera and other quasi-secular performing arts, religious iconography, sculpture, pottery and folk Buddhism, not only of the main Vietnamese ethnic group, but of other minority groups found in the region. Many of these works bore out his conviction that the *Nam Bộ* region of Vietnam comprised a distinctive cultural entity; a view to be found in its most condensed and elegant form in his essay, “An overview of *Nam Bộ* culture.”<sup>53</sup>

Trảng described the cultural distinctiveness of *Nam Bộ* as an enduring property—his was not a snapshot of contemporary cultural developments but an abstraction, synthesizing three to four hundred years of Vietnamese settlement of the region. And yet, it would be inappropriate to opt for a designation of this durable quality as a “cultural tradition” for one of the properties he claimed for this regional culture was its constant propensity to change. For Trảng, the paradox of *Nam Bộ* was that there, nothing could be found in its original form, both autochthonous culture and diverse alien imports were subject to constant ferment, hybridization and transmutation. It was in this absence of originality that the region’s originality could be found. Trảng’s celebration of the dynamism of this region brings to mind Marshall Berman’s

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.317.

<sup>52</sup> Khang’s perspective contrasts sharply with that of Phan Thị Đắc who, in *Situation de la personne au Vietnam* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1966), argued that “despite the political, economic, social and spiritual upheavals of the last century, Vietnamese society still sinks all its roots into an ancient system of order and of values which leaves scarcely a space for the “me” (*moi*) of the individual and small latitude for its expression. On the contrary, social pressure is strong and continuous throughout one’s life and in all domains.”

<sup>53</sup> Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng, “Tổng quát về văn hóa *Nam Bộ*” [A synopsis of *Nam Bộ* culture], *Social Sciences Review* 11 (1992): 59–70.

<sup>54</sup> Marshall Berman, *All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>55</sup> Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng, "A synopsis of *Nam Bộ* culture," p.59.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.60.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.62.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.63.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.65.

unearthing of the modernist imagery of fluidity and ceaseless dynamism in Marx' Communist Manifesto.<sup>54</sup> Trảng, while studying a society rather than a text, offered an interpretation as innovative as Berman's, for he read these "modernist" properties in an allegedly premodern society. This was evident in the way he dealt with the supposedly recent advent of "modernity" in the form of French colonization.

According to Trảng, the culture of the central Vietnamese provinces of Thuận-Quảng formed the basis of *Nam Bộ* culture, due to the provenance of most early immigrants to *Nam Bộ* from this region.<sup>55</sup> The region's link to the Vietnamese cultural heartland of the Red River delta was thus blurred from the start, due to such influence from a region that had until then been on the Vietnamese periphery—heavily marked by the Indianized culture of the Chams. What is more, due to the non-élite nature of the migrants, the cultural baggage they brought with them had been the folk culture of this central region.<sup>56</sup> Over time, this heterodox cultural base had been overlaid by court attempts to disseminate orthodox Confucian culture in the *Nam Bộ* region. Yet such efforts had been unsuccessful in eliminating the folk cultural basis which itself underwent changes due to local ecological and cultural factors.<sup>57</sup>

The settlers had adopted a strikingly different resident pattern from the classic nucleated settlements of the Red River Delta, settling along the streams and canals of the southern plain in a scattered, strung-out fashion. Due to the sparseness of population, settlers had been extremely hospitable towards all newcomers, regardless of ethnic background or social respectability, as they helped swell critically scarce labour resources. These factors had combined to create a cultural climate of openness and diffidence towards tradition.<sup>58</sup> The region had also seen the early emergence of the major urban centre of Gia Định (now found within Hồ Chí Minh City precincts) which was "renowned for its beauty and orderly arrangements of streets" and as a major international commercial centre, where "people from the four seas" brushed shoulders. This urban area had served as a "fascinating beacon" for a way of life unfamiliar to most Vietnamese:

In general, the entire gamut of customs of this urban area was truly seen as a fashionable model—representative of a luxurious way of life entirely different from ancient refinements and the rural way of life.<sup>59</sup>

According to Trảng, a century prior to French colonization, the *Nam Bộ* region had already had a multi-racial character. *Nam Bộ* had been the confluence of many cultural currents and their hybridization had proceeded apace. Chief among these had been the fusion of the Indianized central Vietnamese folk culture and cultural influences from Southern China—a region whose emigrants had early established a substantial presence in *Nam Bộ*. This new "Sino-Vietnamese cultural complex" had exercised a powerful hold over all inhabitants of the region—strongest in the urban upper class, but still evident in the remotest rural hamlet.<sup>60</sup>

Trảng noted that this pre-colonial mix had included many elements of

French cultural influence dating from the eighteenth century. He conceded that colonization of the region had sparked a range of anti-colonial cultural resistance movements—from the revolt of the scholars to the emergence of messianic religious movements in the lower classes.<sup>61</sup> Yet, his discussion focused on the tendency of the many modern folk religions (*tôn giáo dân gian hiện đại*) to be very eclectic in their borrowing of symbolism, driven by a “miscellaneous” (*đa tạp*) or “baroque” (he used the French term) aesthetic. The regional tendency toward bricolage, according to Trảng, was typified in the Cao Đài religion’s “complex of unprincipled mixture” (*phức thể lai tạp vô nguyên tắc*).<sup>62</sup> The field of secular culture was marked by a voracious appetite for French and Chinese novels and theatre, but again he found the eclectic spirit of *Nam Bộ* more evident in popular cultural forms such as the southern reform opera *cải lương*.<sup>63</sup>

For Trảng, *cải lương* typified *Nam Bộ* culture in its eclectic absorption of diverse musical and theatrical genres, costume styles and plots drawn from all eras and all quarters of the globe, as well as its central characteristic of constant transformation. The significance of this genre for understanding the spirit of *Nam Bộ* was underlined in (appropriately) mixed metaphors:

*Cải lương*’s quality of acceptance on no fixed principles could possibly be viewed as mere mixture, yet from a different, more open and positive perspective, this characteristic signifies what is typical about *Nam Bộ*—a crossroads with doors always open to waves from all the four corners of the earth from the time of its first settlement to today.<sup>64</sup>

His most colourful examples of the eclecticism of *Nam Bộ* culture—urban cosmopolitanism, southern Chinese cultural influence, Cao Daoism and *cải lương*—were not viewed as legacies of the dynamism and plurality of colonial times. Rather, he cited these as evidence of an essential regional quality, pertaining from the time of first Vietnamese settlement to the present.

Accordingly, French colonialism had been mere grist for the voracious mill of *Nam Bộ* culture. The transformations wrought in those times had merely perpetuated the region’s propensity to change. The innovations the French had brought to bear had merely catered to its appetite for the new. Trảng concluded his highly condensed essay by abstracting three of the essential qualities characterizing this regional culture:

**Figure 7**

*Nam Bộ* exoticists: Hồ Chí Minh City sightseers in Tây Ninh Province at the Holy See of the Cao Đài faith



<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.66.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.67.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p.70.

<sup>67</sup> Pierre Brocheux, *The Mekong delta: ecology, economy and revolution, 1860–1960* (Madison, Wis.: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1995).

<sup>78</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình et al., *Văn hóa và cư dân đồng bằng sông Cửu long* [The culture and population of the Mekong delta] (Hà Chí Minh City: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1990), p.27.

1. The baroque cultural character of this region ... can be described in summary: nothing about it is unique. Rather it should be understood as an incorporation (*thâu hốt*) of all kinds of things from all different regions gathered together here.

2. As this is a busy crossroads always encountering the new, there is not one cultural pattern, artistic form, or cultural need or taste surviving in its original form over a specified time. Everything is in constant and rapid renewal (*đổi mới*) creating new forms responding to the needs and tastes of each era.<sup>65</sup>

3. [These two points have “organic links” with a third characteristic of *Nam Bộ* culture]—that is, the faddishness and exoticism in the cultural taste of the people of *Nam Bộ*.<sup>66</sup>

Another work of note in this same vein was the study of the Western Mekong delta by French-Vietnamese historian, Pierre Brocheux.<sup>67</sup> Brocheux argued that the Mekong delta’s plural society, ostensibly a feature of French colonialism was in fact anticipated by and crucially instigated by the plural society of pre-colonial times, marked by a “vertical cellular structure” of different ethnic groups each performing complementary economic functions.

Whereas such works elided the significance of colonial modernization by finding it anticipated in pre-colonial times, others did so by omitting reference to the colonial power as the engineer of transformations during the colonial period. For example, the collectively written work, *The Culture and Population of The Mekong Delta* referred to the enormous project of canal digging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which had expanded the cultivable area of the Mekong delta fourfold.<sup>68</sup> The authors argued that this had led to an unprecedented level of rice exports in the early twenties of this century: a level which had not been attained since. Western scholarship conventionally attributes these achievements to the French colonial project of expanding export agriculture and yet the above-cited work made no mention of these as French initiatives. Rather, by such omission, these externally-generated initiatives were Vietnamized, or, more precisely, indigenized as part of the distinctively dynamic history of the Mekong delta.

Such views radically disputed the tradition–modernity dichotomization through which the French colonization of Vietnam had been taken to constitute an event of historic rupture with the past. For these authors French colonization in Vietnam represented less of a break with the past than previously conceived, particularly in the region of *Nam Bộ*, whose pre-colonial society was seen to have anticipated many of the features typifying modernity. As most of these authors focused on the period of Vietnamese settlement, up to two hundred years prior to the founding of the colony of Cochinchina, their works might be considered historical. However, classifying them as pre-modern historians or late imperial historians is problematic, given the kinds of claims they were making. They might be more suitably classed as modern historians, due to their collective efforts in shifting the inception of Vietnamese modernity back at least two hundred years prior to French colonization, as well as geographically delimiting its emergence to the

southernmost part of the country.

The case made by these Vietnamese authors, that the region of *Nam Bộ*, for geographical and historical reasons, had been better integrated into broad global developments than other parts of Vietnam, does lend credence to their assertions about the distinctive character of the region. Yet suspicions linger that another agenda, apart from historiographical accuracy, was at work. That these developments could have been confined uniquely to and uniformly across, the *Nam Bộ* region, seems quite doubtful. That so many of the distinctive features of the pre-colonial era anticipated developments previously attributed to the French colonial era was another curious and unremarked-upon coincidence. The down-playing or dismissal of the French colonial legacy in the region as relevant to the shaping of the region's unique characteristics, brought their alternative agenda more clearly into view.

It might be argued such writers were participating in a selective invention of tradition—denying the legitimacy of colonial contributions towards modernization by finding colonial-era developments anticipated in pre-colonial times. With modernization a goal pursued by Vietnam's post-colonial governments, the parallels with colonialism could be elided and the modernizing programs of the contemporary regime could find their justification in terms of tradition. Yet this is a strange example of tradition—a term more commonly associated with stasis, timelessness and moral certitude. The “tradition” being inventively alluded to was, paradoxically, a tradition of modernity—of pre-colonial dynamism, commodity relations, individuation, urbanization, restless hybridization and transformation of cultural forms. As such, Sahlin's evocative phrase, “the indigenization of modernity” might be preferred as a more accurate definition of this process.<sup>69</sup>

To describe the post-colonial Vietnamese regime's appropriation of the

<sup>69</sup> Marshall Sahlins, “Goodbye to tristes tropes: ethnography in the context of modern world history,” *Journal of Modern History* 65 (1993): 21.



**Figure 8**

“Baroque” interior of the Cao Đài Holy See, Tây Ninh

<sup>70</sup> Hoàng Thiệu Khang, “Embarking on socialism—regarding the Southern Vietnamese personality structure.”

<sup>71</sup> This indigenous modernity is therefore not to be confused with a “world-system”-type argument—that all indigenous societies were transformed by the global expansion of capitalism.

<sup>72</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The philosophical discourse of modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987); Anthony Giddens, *The consequences of modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity, 1990).

supposedly “modern” legacies of colonialism for reinstatement as the pre-colonial past as such, might require that Sahlins’ phrase itself be appropriated. While his approach promises a welcome movement away from the assumption that “Western modernity” is relentlessly superceding “indigenous” traditions, Sahlins appears to view indigeneity as an ontological condition, capable not only of robustly surviving “modernization” but of channelling modernity’s most disruptive incursions into the reproduction of indigenous forms. By celebrating indigenous durability, in a globalizing world, he thus maintains an essentialist notion of cultural differences. His defence of the concept of culture against poststructuralists and postmodernists of all hues is perhaps insufficiently mindful that “tradition” and indeed, “modernity” are contested, discursive concepts. Sahlins’ spirited defence of the flagging academic discipline of anthropology, lacks sensitivity to the dilemmas of identity as framed by those who remain within its lens of objectification as “modernity’s” others, and it shores up the discipline’s monopolization of the authority to name, what is traditional or modern. Another approach would be to recognize that people everywhere will always invest these terms with significations appropriate to their contemporary concerns. This I believe is exactly what was being done in the writings of Vietnamese social scientists of the early *đổi mới* era. They were engaged in the discursive project of indigenizing modernity: filling the concept of pre-colonial identity with a content previously only ever attributed to the “modern” colonial era.

According to these authors, the diverse markers of modernity mentioned in their works had been around in Vietnam as long as they had in the “West.” Some authors such as Hoàng Thiệu Khang, who stated that the commodification of social relations in *Nam Bộ* in the eighteenth century “bore the universal mark of global history,” appeared to link this to the global emergence and expansion of capitalist modernity.<sup>72</sup> Yet although the date of Vietnamese settlement in *Nam Bộ* (and hence, the commencement of Vietnamese modernity) did roughly coincide with an upsurge in the intensification of global capitalist relations, Khang did not propound this as the impetus for societal transformation. His concern was to underline the synchronous occurrence of Vietnamese and global developments. There was something inherent to the region that made it, and not other regions of Vietnam, able to respond. The region’s propensity to dynamism was held to be an indigenous feature.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, in some views, the modernity of the region manifested itself long before the dates that a Habermas or a Giddens might give for the emergence of Western modernity in Europe itself, let alone its expansion to other parts of the globe.<sup>74</sup>

### *The Archaeology of Nam Bộ Modernity*

Lê Xuân Diễm, an archaeologist based in the Hồ Chí Minh City Institute of Social Sciences, in his contribution to the volume *South Vietnam and the Enterprise of Renovation*, argued that the distinctive cultural legacies of the



<sup>111</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Viên, “The Mekong delta: a socio-historical survey,” p.342.

### *Modern by Nature*

Arguments, for example, by Diệm, Nguyễn Công Bình *et al.* and Hoàng Thiệu Khang, which proposed that the allegedly dynamic character of the *Nam Bộ* region was of ancient origin, were marked by an incipient essentialism that emerged explicitly in Trần Hoàng Kim *et al.*'s account. If in the latter work recourse was made to the factors of regional “soul” and “blood,” others saw the geographical or ecological properties of the region itself as the significant factors promoting continuity. This was as true of those authors dealing only with the Vietnamese colonization of the *Nam Bộ* region as those who dealt with earlier settlement.

In his treatment of the regional history of the Mekong delta, Nguyễn Khắc Viên placed much emphasis on its unique ecology in shaping local forms. In Viên's account, society in the delta bore the imprints of nature more deeply than in other parts of the country. In this region, social solidarity sprang from nature rather than tradition. He sketched an image of the region's typical settlement pattern:

The houses, instead of pressing close to one another inside a bamboo hedge, [a classic reference to the Red River delta in northern Vietnam] were now scattered along waterways and facing them. A number of houses were built on stilts. Each family had a boat for transportation and fishing. The roads and lanes, practicable only in the dry season, were at many places connected by shaky “monkey bridges,” made of a single coconut palm or bamboo trunk.<sup>111</sup>

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#### **Figure 11**

*Riverside market in Cần Thơ, principal centre of the Western Mekong delta*



(*hòa nhập*) to the rhythm of the age (*nhịp sống thời đại*).<sup>108</sup>

The era of globalization was evoked not as a threat to identity but on the contrary, to show history moving in a way that would allow the region's identity its full realization. If the people of the Mekong delta were able to fall easily into stride with contemporary global developments, it was because their own local history was of such a dynamic character.

Initially, the authors focused on the era of Vietnamese settlement of the delta, agreeing with authors such as Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng and Nguyễn Công Bình *et al.* that here, cultural legacies from elsewhere had undergone dynamic transformation:

Since long ago, the people coming to exploit this waste region have brought with them cultural characteristics from every region of the country. Through many generations, the inhabitants of the Mekong delta have maintained the national essence, simultaneously renewing (*đổi mới*) and developing it to construct a separate, original cultural history of their own.<sup>107</sup>

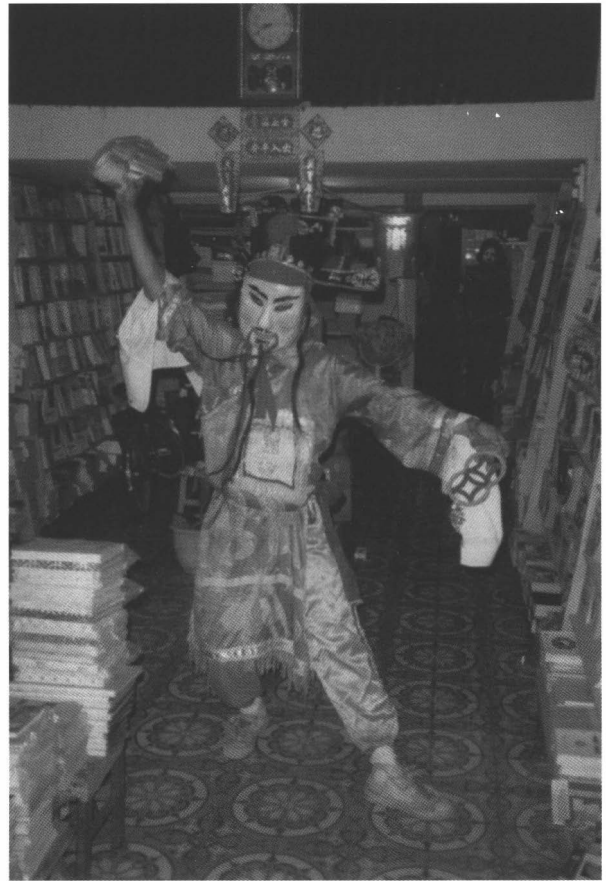
Yet the authors found strongest proof of the region's ability to adapt to a new "epoch" such as the present one, by invoking an epochal, *longue durée* account of regional history:

If we follow the course of history, we find this place has seen three consecutive cultures: *Đồng Nai* culture, *Ốc Eo* culture and *Gia Định* culture. The transition of these cultures proves that the inhabitants of the Mekong delta by birth carry in their blood a sensitivity to the times and they can always find the quickest way to adapt their way of life to new situations.<sup>108</sup>

The sensitivity to the new or "exoticism," which Trảng described as a cultural constant of seventeenth- to twentieth-century *Nam Bộ* culture, was here given a millennial cast. Others cited the millennial succession of cultures in the region as evidence of the region's uniquely dynamic history<sup>109</sup> or ancient vitality of culture.<sup>110</sup> The present authors found in this same history the relevance of distinctive biological factors. It is not quite clear whether the authors saw such factors as determinant of the region's millennial history of dynamism or a heredity legacy of it. If the latter meaning was intended, it certainly does not exclude the former—according to which "birth" and "blood" supposedly enabled the inhabitants of the Mekong delta "always to find the quickest way to adapt their way of life to new situations."

**Figure 10**

*Southern Vietnamese cultural influences: The Jade Emperor (Ngọc Hoàng) blesses a Minh Hai bookstore during Tết, and (opposite page) prize-winning dancer Hương Giang in a rendition of "Siva"*



<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Lê Xuân Diễm, "South Vietnam, a lively cultural-historical region."

<sup>110</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, *The culture and population of the Mekong delta*.

<sup>102</sup> Trần Hoàng Kim et al., *Đồng bằng sông Cửu long: vị trí và tiềm năng* [The Mekong delta: its location and potentialities] (Hanoi: Statistical Publishing House, 1991).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36.

1. Đờng Nai culture of the Indonesians; 2. Ốc Eo culture of the *Phù Nam* Indonesians and Thiên Trúc people of ancient India; 3. Vietnamese culture in Gia Định of the *Nam Bộ* Vietnamese and Khmer, Hoa, Chăm, Ma ethnic groups in *Nam Bộ*.<sup>103</sup>

The final work which lent such a millennial cast to the distinctive character of this region was the 1991 study *The Mekong Delta: Its Location and Potential*.<sup>104</sup> This was published as a bilingual edition, obviously aimed at inducting foreign investors into appreciation of the region's unique properties. While the poorly-translated English version thus represented an influential document in its own right, I have retranslated the Vietnamese original to recapture its more coherent and nuanced voice, for arguments in the book also contributed to an on-going debate in the Vietnamese language.

The bulk of this book was devoted to detailed description and copious statistical data on the agricultural, aquacultural and industrial potential of the various Mekong delta provinces, clearly laid out for the benefit of potential foreign investors and traders. This was introduced with an essay detailing the region's outstanding performance in responding to the liberalization of the late 1980s. It concluded in a manner seemingly pitched at reassuring foreign investors that they would be understood and well-received if they chose to do business here. It noted that:

[t]he Mekong delta early developed as a region of commodity trade and international relations. Once, traders from India, China and European countries frequently stopped here to purchase agricultural products, handicraft items such as rice, sugar, silk and art products made from gold, silver and tortoise shell.<sup>105</sup>

Contemporary investors have found that:

... the inhabitants of the Mekong delta have received them in the broad-minded manner of *Anh Hai Nam Bộ* (*Nam Bộ* eldest brother) following the Vietnamese tradition "four oceans are the same house."<sup>106</sup>

In this manner of life, the people of the delta were implicitly contrasted with those of other regions of Vietnam:

Although living in an agricultural area, with small production still widespread, life is not unchanging, inward-looking, secretive nor self-sufficient. An open-hearted way of life is a clear characteristic of the inhabitants of the Mekong delta.<sup>107</sup>

The authors presented this quality as an inherent characteristic of the people of this region. Fortunately, for the inhabitants of the Mekong delta, at the outset of the 1990s, history was finally moving in a direction that would allow them full self-expression:

In this epoch, when economic, cultural and social activities are breaking down the barriers between people, when borders between nations are now only geographical divisions, the soul (*tâm hồn*) and manner (*phong cách*) of the inhabitants of the Mekong delta will easily allow them to assimilate



people” were treated as the more coherent “Đồng Nai culture” (*văn hóa Đồng Nai*) whose inception was pushed back at least another millennium to 5000 BP. Further-more, the Óc Eo period was treated more respectfully as a discrete culture (*văn hóa Óc Eo*) rather than as the mere crescendo of the Đồng Nai people’s activities. Hence, when the patterns of the *longue durée* were evoked, it could be done with greater scope and through greater detail than could Diệm alone, who was always struggling to evoke the historically sublime with only two case studies.

The central theme of the book was a familiar one: to describe the distinctive dynamism of the *Nam Bộ* way of life:

That is a life, neither closed nor secretive, neither autarchic nor self-sufficient; a way of life always integrating the new, always assimilating with different communities, both far and near.<sup>99</sup>

This was a view of dynamism with both horizontal (assimilative) and vertical (transformational) axes. This property of the region was evoked in three major senses. The first, and perhaps most striking, was the description of dynamism as a five-thousand-year-old constant, evident since ancient times:

We have read several hundred pages, giving a picture of a large region, the Mekong delta. This delta has been shown clearly as an ancient, diverse and vital (*sống động*) cultural area. This place, as we have seen has many products, many Eastern and Western values have co-existed, with many human communities, peoples living alongside each other. Also in this place are many different ancient traditions, which have continued to be cultivated and “renovated” (“*cách tân*”) in today’s modern life; with many purebred (*thuần chủng*) peoples mingled (*hỗn chủng*) into one place and integrated into each other (*hòa nhập vào nhau*).<sup>100</sup>

The second approach was developmentalist, according to which both the process of becoming, as much as the end-product, evinced a dynamic quality:

The diverse and unique socio-cultural space in the Mekong delta has gradually formed in the course of many thousands of years of history. This is linked to major environmental changes in the delta, changes in the ethnic population and activities widening the economic and cultural communicative relations over many distinct historical eras.<sup>101</sup>

Third was the *longue durée* sense of dynamism, evoked by Diệm, of a vital progression of cultures through the region.<sup>102</sup> Such a view drew strength from its analytical separation of Đồng Nai and Óc Eo cultures as well as retaining the view of “an interval of time and of cultural and historical rupture” between “Óc Eo Culture” and the “Gia Định Culture of the *Nam Bộ* Vietnamese”:

Closely following the course of history, we can easily see this plain is one of the most vital (*sôi động*) regions. Wave after wave of people have come to settle and earn a living. Layer upon layer of cultures overlap and mix (*hòa trộn*) with each other. Amongst these, the three most important cultures are:

<sup>97</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, *The culture and population of the Mekong delta*, p.426.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p.423.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Lê Xuân Diệm, “South Vietnam, a lively cultural-historical region.”

<sup>101</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, *The culture and population of the Mekong delta*, p.425.

<sup>94</sup> By “South Vietnam” (*Miền Nam Việt Nam*), Diem referred here to the southern half of the country, and extended this concluding observation to the area which had been home to the Sa Huỳnh and Chăm cultures as well.

<sup>95</sup> Lê Xuân Diệm, “South Vietnam, a lively cultural–historical region,” p.304. Nguyễn Công Bình, *The culture and population of the Mekong delta* (quotation marks in original).

<sup>96</sup> In fact Diệm was one of its editors and a member of its thirty-six-member authorial collective.

“southward advance” (*nam tiến*), conventionally depicted the Vietnamese arriving as pioneers in a deserted land turning their millennial tradition of struggle to profit against nature—a happy framing of an encounter that both lent moral legitimacy to their presence and reinvested with relevance the tradition that made settlement of the region possible. Beyond denying Cambodian claims to the region, the view of Vietnamese as heroic instigators of settlement in a deserted land also served the cause of national unity. To be any more explicit than Diệm or Khang already were about continuities with an ancient pre-Vietnamese entity of *Nam Bộ* would have been an unwanted invitation for other interested parties to advance arguments for regional autonomy or annexation.

While toeing the official line that the land was deserted, Diệm turned an archaeologist’s perspective to it in a manner that greatly extended and enlivened the notion of the region of *Nam Bộ*’s indigenous dynamism.

The rupture between an ancient *Nam Bộ* civilization and Vietnamese settlement posed by the trope of reversion to deserted land allowed those with an eye to the *longue durée* to propose the sequential rise and fall of civilizations in the region as evidence of its inexorable and profound dynamism. Diệm saw dynamism to be a property of the Đồng Nai people’s Ốc Eo civilization, as well as of the much later Vietnamese settlement. Yet in contrast with these “micro”-dynamisms, by incorporating both civilizations into a *longue durée* perspective, he advanced the case for a “macro”-historical dynamism. This was a view investing dynamic agency in the region itself:

South Vietnam<sup>96</sup> with its numerous stages of historical cultures described here is a region with a truly lively social life, seen in few other areas, a region of “open” space (*không gian “mở”*), a major human-cultural meeting point, with a continuously “renovating” (“*đổi mới*”) and creative history.<sup>97</sup>

For Diệm, “openness” was the horizontal dimension of South Vietnam and *Nam Bộ*’s “liveliness”—the region’s embrace of diverse external currents that Diệm and others described as a distinctive characteristic. “Continuous renovation” represented the vertical dimension of the region’s dynamism. Not only was such ferment found in each of *Nam Bộ*’s historical cultures, as also described, for example, by Trảng and Khang, but it was evident in the sequence of civilizations through this region as well. This was a creative use of the reversion to wilderness thesis, for asserting a hiatus between civilizations allowed presentation of a more dramatic *longue durée* account of rising and falling civilizations than if a thesis of cultural continuity were maintained.

The collectively-authored publication of the Institute of Social Sciences, *The Culture and Population of the Mekong Delta*, ran a very similar, book-length argument to Diệm’s article.<sup>98</sup> While more than half of the book was devoted to contemporary Mekong delta society, this was situated within a *longue durée* perspective. Indeed the work represented something of a vehicle for archaeologists. In it, the accomplishments of Diệm’s “Đồng Nai

Vietnamese who, arriving only 300–400 years ago, were the most recent immigrants to the ancient region of *Nam Bộ*, in two ways. First:

... the Vietnamese of *Nam Bộ*, the terminal point of Vietnam, assimilated the experience of millennia of generations of Vietnamese in opening up the land in the south with that of the local communities here since long ago.<sup>93</sup>

Second, the complex and dynamic society created by the Vietnamese evoked, somewhat more poetically, the experience of Phù Nam, the highest achievement of the *Đông Nai* people:

Here, [the Vietnamese] quickly transformed the Mekong plain into a multi-formed agricultural area, linked with trade activity beyond the region. This agriculture was marked by the synchronous development of wet rice, orchards, forestry, fisheries in conditions of a rich, multi-formed natural environment. Here we can see it is as if the experience of Phù Nam was re-established ...<sup>94</sup>

Diệm was somewhat hesitant to stress the factors of continuity linking the achievements of previous peoples settling the *Nam Bộ* region (“*Đông Nai*,” Chàm, Cambodian) to those of their successors, the Vietnamese. Indeed, his few allusive references to this continuity were already quite surprising, the prevailing line on Mekong delta settlement history being that by the time the first Vietnamese settlers arrived there, the whole region (including contemporary Hồ Chí Minh City) had long reverted to wilderness (*hoang phế*).<sup>95</sup> Such a history writing convention was blind to the presence of Khmers (and others) in the *Nam Bộ* region and fell silent on the Nguyễn Lords’ political and military actions that neutralized the Khmer state’s control over the eastern third of their Kingdom. In contemporary Party histories, references to the

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.303.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> An example of this historiographic convention can be found in Trần Văn Giàu’s (1987) contribution to a 1987 three-volume work on Hồ Chí Minh City. Giàu wrote that Vietnamese settlers in the region now covered by Hồ Chí Minh city had to contend with tigers, and that the land in which they had settled was a wilderness (*đất hoang*): “Lược sử thành phố Hồ Chí Minh” [History of Hồ Chí Minh City], in Trần Văn Giàu et al., eds, *Địa chí thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* [Hồ Chí Minh City monograph] (Hồ Chí Minh City: Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House, 1987), p.236. One of the notable exceptions is Phan Quang, *Viết sử: xứ dân trong 1558–1777 cuộc Nam Tiến của dân tộc Việt Nam* [History of the Inner Region 1558–1777: the southward advance of the Vietnamese people] (Saigon: Nhà Sách Khai Trí, 1967).



**Figure 9**

*Chàm towers at Phan Rang*

<sup>80</sup> Lê Xuân Diệm, “South Vietnam, a lively cultural–historical region,” p.300.

<sup>81</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, “Some starting points of the South on its way to socialism.”

<sup>82</sup> Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng, “A synopsis of *Nam Bộ* culture,” p.69.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Lê Xuân Diệm, “South Vietnam, a lively cultural–historical region,” p.298 .

<sup>85</sup> Hoàng Thiệu Khang, “Embarking on socialism—regarding the Southern Vietnamese personality structure,” p.310.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. (emphasis in original).

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p.311.

<sup>89</sup> Lê Xuân Diệm, “South Vietnam, a lively cultural–historical region,” p.299.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p.304.

The world-famous Ốc Eo civilization (*văn minh Ốc Eo*) was born and expanded in those lively historical events. At the same time, they were the clear proof that the ancient people of Đồng Nai were familiar with “renovation” (*đổi mới*) in accordance with their times. They simultaneously continued to exploit the agricultural potential of the highlands, begun flooded agricultural activities, quickly exerted themselves to create new potentials, oriented themselves to the sea and were active in trade, building the fortunes of the country of Phù Nam with its economic, political and cultural influence throughout the Southeast oceans in the early Christian era.<sup>82</sup>

The diversification and innovation evident here recalls Nguyễn Công Bình’s account of the complexity and dynamism of *Nam Bộ* in the concluding centuries of the pre-colonial era.<sup>83</sup> Đồng Nai people’s “renovation in accordance with their times,” recalls Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng’s notion of *Nam Bộ* as a crossroads, where “everything is in constant and rapid renewal, creating new forms responding to the needs and taste of each era.”<sup>84</sup> This regional characteristic, which Trảng saw as commencing with Vietnamese settlement in the seventeenth century, was back-dated by Diệm to the early Christian era and applied to a different group of people. Another of Trảng’s characteristics of “*Nam Bộ* culture” was that “it should be understood as a collection of all kinds of things from all different regions gathered together here.”<sup>85</sup> According to Diệm, this trait was also evident in the ancient settlement of the *Nam Bộ* plain:

Here, in the past, existed a region of the most lively assemblage of historical cultures and peoples.<sup>86</sup>

Referring to Ốc Eo as the most ancient of the cultures of *Nam Bộ*, Hoàng Thiệu Khang, in his contribution to this volume, reiterated this point.<sup>87</sup> Khang argued that the archaeological vestiges of Ốc Eo culture (*văn hóa Ốc Eo*) showed it to have been a melting pot of many currents of religious thought: both “Aryan” and “Dravidian” streams of Hinduism, lesser vehicle Buddhism with strong Brahmanic influence, “Sanskrit Buddhism” as well as “orthodox Buddhism.” Their complex hybridization in Ốc Eo times revealed

precisely, the ancient *Nam Bộ* people’s logic of biochemical (*nơi sinh hóa*) combination of thoughts of foreign origin, *a logic of assemblage* (*hóa hợp*) and *integration* (*hóa nhập*), enabling their coexistence.<sup>88</sup>

This quality according to Khang was of more than historic significance for, “the imprint of such thought and such a style is clearly evident today.”<sup>89</sup> The influence of the ancient culture of Ốc Eo still manifests itself

in the thoughts, the outlook on life and the mentality ... (in short), in the modern spiritual life of the people of *Nam Bộ*.<sup>90</sup>

In a similar vein, Diệm argued that the socio-economic developments of the ancient cultures of South Vietnam “made them important foundations for the socio-economic and cultural developments of the succeeding [Vietnamese] era.”<sup>91</sup> At another point, he noted that “their progeny are still in full evidence.”<sup>92</sup> The ancient Đồng Nai people still exerted influence on the

ancient peoples who preceded Vietnamese settlement in the southern half of Vietnam had a bearing on the region's current prospects. Diệm wrote that in this region, three to four thousand years ago, two ancient peoples emerged more or less simultaneously: the Sa Huỳnh people (*người Sa Huỳnh*), in central Vietnam's coastal plain and the Đồng Nai people (*người Đồng Nai*) "in the *Nam Bộ* plain."<sup>75</sup> His comments on the Đồng Nai people are worth comparing with his contemporaries' writings on the region of *Nam Bộ* for he saw the geographical extension of their ancient culture as identical to the *Nam Bộ* of the "modern historians." Two other features of his argument are of interest. Many of the distinctive traits of *Nam Bộ*, identified by writers such as Nguyễn Công Bình,<sup>76</sup> Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng<sup>77</sup> and Hoàng Thiệu Khang<sup>78</sup> as qualities dating back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were, according to Diệm, anticipated by about two millennia with the emergence of the country of Phù Nam (*nước Phù Nam*) in the *Nam Bộ* plain. Second, he argued that these early developments remained influential to this day, making the *Nam Bộ* region's distinctively "modern" character indebted to ancient times.

According to Diệm, the Indonesian (*Anhdonediang*) people who settled the *Nam Bộ* plain three to four thousand years ago led a fairly humble existence for almost two millennia, their agricultural and trade activities eclipsed by the East-West struggle between the civilizations of China and India for cultural predominance in the region.<sup>79</sup> Yet their ocean-going traditions saw the Đồng Nai people become active participants in significant pre-Christian-era global exchanges:

In the *Nam Bộ* plain, the people of Đồng Nai conquered the Mekong delta, built a life on the swamplands and opened up economic activity—trading with the rapidly-developing trans-oceanic business routes of their day. The Mekong plain in no time became a central commercial destination with many important international ports: Nền Chùa, Cạnh Đền, Cồn Giẽ, Ốc Eo.<sup>80</sup>

Diệm's characterization of this region's ancient integration into the global economy anticipated the supposedly radical rupture posed by French colonization by more than two millennia. The picture painted by Diệm is reminiscent of that offered by the nineteenth-century mandarin-geographer Trịnh Hoài Đức whose report, *Gia Định Thành Tổng Chí*, was cited by fellow contributor, Nguyễn Công Bình, in defence of his vision of pre-colonial *Nam Bộ* as a bustling commercial centre. A region which, for Trịnh Hoài Đức, had been an entrepôt "unparalleled throughout the entire country" and "the regular commercial hub for several countries,"<sup>81</sup> was, in ancient times, according to Diệm, a commercial destination with "many important international ports."

The culmination of the Đồng Nai people's development of their economy and opening up of trade links was to come in the emergence of the Mekong delta "civilization" of Ốc Eo and country of Phù Nam, about whose global significance, Diệm waxed hyperbolic:

<sup>73</sup> Lê Xuân Diệm, "Miền Nam Việt Nam, một vòng văn hóa-lịch sử sống động" [South Vietnam, a lively cultural-historical region], in Nguyễn Quang Vinh, *South Vietnam and the nation's enterprise of Renovation*, p.298.

<sup>74</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, *South Vietnam and the enterprise of Renovation*; idem, "Mấy khía cạnh xã hội qua cuộc điều tra kinh tế-xã hội nông nghiệp đồng bằng sông Cửu long" [Social aspects as revealed in an agricultural-social-economic survey of the Mekong delta], *Tạp Chí Khoa Học Xã Hội* 9 (1991): 10–20.

<sup>75</sup> Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng, "A synopsis of *Nam Bộ* culture."

<sup>76</sup> Hoàng Thiệu Khang, "Embarking on socialism—regarding the Southern Vietnamese personality structure."

<sup>77</sup> Lê Xuân Diệm, "South Vietnam, a lively cultural-historical region," p.298.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.300.

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Nguyễn Công Bình, "Some starting points of the South on its way to socialism," p.24.



In this environment, the pressing constraint upon its inhabitants was not society, but nature. As a result, social similarities with the northern delta could be deceptive:

The villages were bound by very strong solidarity which sprang not from strongly established institutions as in the north but rather from the pioneers' joint efforts in the face of common dangers.<sup>112</sup>

Nature left its marks too in the cosmology of Mekong delta peasants, accounting for the proliferation of millenarian sects, animism, "fetishistic practices" and less attention to orthodox creeds such as Confucianism, Buddhism and the cult of the ancestors. The reason for this was that:

... the hold of the (feudal) system here was not as strong as in the north and the centre, the inhabitants having always the possibility of leaving the village to reclaim land elsewhere.<sup>113</sup>

As a result of these ecological factors:

... liberation from Confucian shackles opened the door to many a creed and superstition. ... Facing a redoubtable nature, deprived of the support of strongly-structured village communities, the pioneer with all his courage needed the comfort offered by various religions and creeds.<sup>114</sup>

The unique basis of the formation of social solidarity in the Mekong delta—the challenges posed by a perilous, untamed natural environment—was one cited by many authors. This approach rested on a conception of the region of *Nam Bộ* as a wilderness prior to Vietnamese settlement. The social solidarity that had emerged from this, as authors from Sơn Nam to Hoàng Thiệu Khang argued, was characterized by the emergence of a distinctly individualist mentality. Thus, as Khang noted, the early pioneers' mutual reliance in the face of an overwhelming nature resulted in "spontaneous" communities predicated on free membership. Contemporary southern Vietnamese individualism derived from this pioneer-era valuation of individual autonomy.

Viên also noted that the ready availability of land in the context of a still redoubtable nature resulted in the diminution of Confucianism's hold and the proliferation of religious heterodoxy. Others carried this ecological argument further, whereby southern religious heterodoxy was held to derive from the imprint on the settlement pattern of *Nam Bộ*'s unique hydrography. Hồ Chí Minh City historian Trần Văn Giàu also commented on the way houses in the northern delta were "tightly clustered in villages surrounded by bamboo hedges, while dwellings in the south[ern delta] were scattered along the Mekong river's tributaries."<sup>115</sup> In an interview with *Far Eastern Economic Review* journalist Murray Hiebert, he argued that this had been influential in shaping the different dispositions of peasants in the two regions:

In the north, the bamboo hedge determines the village ... It keeps villagers in and outsiders out. If you have no fence you have no limitations.<sup>116</sup>

Giàu argued that this explained for example, the different receptivity to

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.343.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p.345.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p.346.

<sup>115</sup> Murray Hiebert, *Vietnam notebook*, revised ed. (Hong Kong: Review Publishing Company, 1994), p.18.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. The historical accuracy of this comparison is a separate issue.

<sup>118</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Viên, "The Mekong delta: a socio-historical survey"; Sơn Nam, *The Southern Vietnamese personality*; Hoàng Thiệu Khang, "Embarking on socialism—regarding the Southern Vietnamese personality structure."

the message of the early Catholic missionaries arriving in Vietnam in pre-colonial times. Hiebert paraphrased Giàu's explanation as follows:

Giàu says southern peasants are more susceptible to outside influences because they do not have fences. For example, early French missionaries were more successful in finding Roman Catholic converts in the south than in the north. In the north, their first converts were traders and fishermen who lived outside traditional, fenced-in Confucian villages.<sup>117</sup>

Likewise, Huỳnh Ngọc Trảng found *Nam Bộ* culture's fascination with the new and restless hybridization of forms to be best exemplified in the furious eclecticism of the Cao Đài religion. The aesthetic of "unprincipled mixture" which he claimed Cao Đàiism embodied, derived from *Nam Bộ*'s geographical remoteness from the orthodoxy of the centre and the open structure of southern villages. Such geographical and ecological factors accounted for the catholicity and dynamism of Cao Đàiism and other syncretic folk creeds, as well as quasi-secular artistic forms such as *cải lương*. Indeed, for Trảng, the hydrography of *Nam Bộ* provided an inexhaustible fund of metaphor for his account of its general cultural traits. *Nam Bộ* represented a "cultural confluence" into which "streams" of influences "from the four seas" "flow," "mingle" and "mix." His *Nam Bộ* culture had properties of "absorption" yet nothing about it was "stable" or "fixed."

The oft-mentioned abundance of cultural inputs into the southern scene was accompanied by common reference to the relative material abundance of the southern plain. The region was conventionally described as well-endowed with fertile soil, abundant rainfall, plentiful watercourses (needing fewer flood-control measures than in the rest of Vietnam) and moderate seasonal temperature variations. These natural endowments meant the inhabitants of *Nam Bộ* were less often pushed to the limits of survival as is deemed to be frequently the case in the central and northern parts of the country. While a "dangerous" or "redoubtable" nature is seen to have posed a challenge to the survival of the early pioneers,<sup>118</sup> the natural abundance of the delta was seen by the same authors to have also provided a disposition towards openness, immediate gratification of desires, lack of concern for the morrow and the abandonment of traditional practices geared towards survival in the ecologically harsher central and northern regions.

Natural and geographical difference operating in this region over the *longue durée* were also invoked as factors explaining the openness and innovativeness of its inhabitants. The historian Trần Quốc Vương argued that the Chàm and Khmer civilizations that pre-dated the Vietnamese in this region were oriented to the sea. This made them open to external influences such as Indian culture. In contrast, "Hanoi had no seaport; it was the capital of the peasantry," he claimed in an interview with Murray Hiebert. He argued that in the course of their long southward migration, Vietnamese migrants left behind much of the Confucian inheritance, dating from China's earlier millennial colonization of Vietnam. Arriving in the southern region, the Vietnamese became influenced by the Chàm and Khmer world view. "The Chàm and

Khmer were open to the sea, so the new arrivals became more open-minded.”<sup>119</sup> While this explained the relatively liberal outlook of southern Vietnamese, those in the north remained bound by tradition. According to Vương, “in the north, people always have one eye looking back [to the historical legacy of China].”<sup>120</sup>

On the operation of ecological factors over the *longue durée*, it might be appropriate to conclude with Nguyễn Công Bình’s (1990) argument about the complexity and dynamism of pre-colonial Vietnamese society in the region of *Nam Bộ*. This included the regionally-specific operation of a commodity economy as a “motor of socio-economic development” as well as a reappraisal of the role of the imperial court which he saw as quite responsive to this process. While these comments were restricted to the era of Vietnamese settlement of *Nam Bộ*, he put another “particular socio-economic feature” of the region, that is, its propensity to dynamism, into the context of ancient history. Bình maintained that this quality had been in effect since the Ốc Eo era. Indeed he viewed the rise and fall of “Ốc Eo culture” as illustrative of this dynamism, which ultimately inhered in the ecology of the region:

This is a region both ancient and modern, a region of very diverse ecological forms in constant change. Rapid change over time, diversity in space governs production and human life. In ancient times, Ốc Eo culture once developed to great splendor, then withered right away, returning to a natural wilderness. The first Vietnamese settlers coming to Đồng Nai–Gia Định also experienced dizziness at the prospect of this new and strange place.<sup>121</sup>

Undergirding the presence of humans in this region whose transitory civilizations have risen and vanished lay a nature whose constant property was dynamism—a nature perpetually at war with itself. The natural conditions of *Nam Bộ*:

demand that human society recognize and master the extremely great hardships brought on by nature: disputes between the river and the sea, conflicts between the rainy and the dry seasons, downpours and droughts, the contradiction between plenty and paucity, differences between fresh-water silt, saline earth and acidic soil.<sup>122</sup>

As the indigenous dynamic propensities of *Nam Bộ* assumed millennial proportions and obtained permanent, ontological grounding in “nature,” the belittlement of the relevance of colonial modernity was complete. In the process of indigenizing the conventional markers of “modernity”—global commodity relations, individualism and ceaseless revolutionizing, European colonial pretensions to have introduced modernity were dismissed and the societal transformations wrought by the French in Cochinchina discursively appropriated. Yet however complete this assault on the prestige of the colonial project may seem, the quarrel was never with the former colonial power nor its historian apologists.

The distinctiveness of *Nam Bộ*, echoed consistently throughout these works was explicitly contrasted with the rest of the country. The region’s permanent ontological modernity was set against the equally inherent

<sup>119</sup> Hiebert, *Vietnam notebook*, p.9.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Nguyễn Công Bình, “Some starting points of the South on its way to socialism,” p.22.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Johannes Fabian argued that anthropology employs an “allochronic” distancing device, “denying coevality,” that is, excluding from the time frame of the observer any society considered as “the Other.” *Time and the other: how anthropology makes its object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

orientation of the rest of the country to closure, autarchy and stasis. Rejecting the view of modernity as the recent, externally-imported innovation of French colonization may have denied an historical rupture between indigenous tradition and Western modernity. Yet the full force of that dichotomization re-emerged in a geographical distinction seen to hold supra-historical relevance—the distinction between a timelessly modern *Nam Bô* and the timelessly “traditional” remainder of the country. The temporal dimension of an ontology of transformation encoded in the tradition/modernity dichotomy was reinvested into an ontology of timeless spatial difference.<sup>123</sup> The audacious appropriation of modernity witnessed here—its theft from time and redistribution in space—arguably implied, as the adage holds for imitation, the highest form of praise. If the French colonial contribution to “modernizing” Cochinchina was obscured in assertions of the indigenous modernity of *Nam Bô*, it was arguably due to the high value placed on that contribution. One could possibly surmise that the “deeper” the indigenization of a feature is pushed (through its rendition as “ancient,” “constant” or “natural”) the higher the value accorded to it.

*Nam Bô* discourse flourished in the late eighties and very early nineties, at a time when the powerhouse of Hồ Chí Minh City was breaking out of the fetters that had bound it, and starting to leave the rest of the country far behind. It occurred in a brief interval, when it looked as if the reforms might both pay dividends and preserve the Party’s monopoly of power, that is, before the contradictions between political monopoly and economic opening became clearly manifest. The early success of reforms in the south had come as a breath of fresh air and shone a harsh light on the inadequacy of depictions of the capitalist south as either land of degraded tradition or the pawn of foreign powers. Casting the south as a place of essential modernity represented a happy stroke: an explanation of its breakaway success and a defense of its integrity in so doing. It may appear ironic that this discourse was substantially penned by those northern cadres who had been originally sent south to administer southern Vietnam’s capitalist legacies out of existence. However, as the most substantial beneficiaries of the reforms—power holders located in the country’s most promising economic frontier—their celebration of openness, commerce and transformation is easier to understand. Herein lies a clue as to why these images of the south ceased to proliferate almost as quickly as they had emerged, indeed just as the south was becoming truer than ever to the *Nam Bô* stereotype: subject to increasing commodity relations, urbanization, individualism, external commerce and cultural hybridization. The invigorating images of a region open to the world, effortlessly able to change and to absorb the shock of the new proved inconsistent with the authoritarian goals of the regime and indeed unpalatable to many southerners less favourably placed to benefit from the reforms. New images of southern Vietnam were soon to emerge, casting it as a vulnerable or, alternatively, threatening place.

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