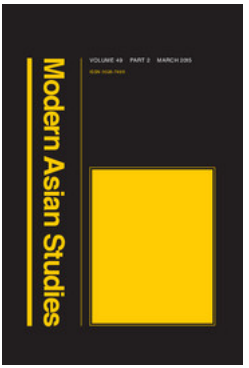

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Modern Asian Studies / Volume 6 / Issue 04 / July 1972, pp 459 - 482
DOI: 10.1017/S0026749X00004315, Published online: 28 November 2008

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0026749X00004315

How to cite this article:
R. B. Smith (1972). The Vietnamese Élite of French Cochinchina, 1943. Modern Asian Studies, 6, pp 459-482 doi:10.1017/S0026749X00004315

Modern Asian Studies 6, 4 (1972), pp. 459–482. Printed in Great Britain.

The Vietnamese Élite of French Cochinchina, 1943

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I

IT is well-known that the French colonial theory of *assimilation*, even though it could never be carried out completely in practice, implied the development in French colonies of an indigenous élite of people prepared to accept both French culture and a (subordinate) role in the running of the colony. In French Cochinchina, this élite was especially important owing to the circumstances of the conquest, between 1860 and 1867, when most of the Vietnamese scholar-officials who had ruled the area previously, withdrew and refused to co-operate with the Europeans. The French had no choice but to create an élite of their own, and begin to educate it in French ways. The process has been discussed in detail in a recent study by Dr Milton E. Osborne, which takes the story of colonial rule in southern Viet-Nam down to about 1905.[1] During the first four decades of the twentieth century, this élite continued to grow and develop, so that by the 1940s it had become the key element in Cochinchinese society so long as colonial rule might last. The purpose of the present article is to examine the composition and role of this élite about the end of the period in which France could take its presence in Indochina for granted.

An élite can be defined in various terms. Some would argue that, in the proper sense of the term, no society subject to foreign domination can have an élite, the topmost positions being reserved for the colonial rulers themselves. Any group willing to collaborate with the foreigners must, by so doing, surrender the right or ability to lead the rest of society in a direction chosen entirely by themselves. Others would suggest that in such a situation the true élite is that of the nationalists who lead resistance movements against foreign domination. From this point of view, the social groups to be discussed in the pages that follow would have to be regarded as something less than an élite. Their importance in the modern history of south Viet-Nam, however, cannot

[1] Milton E. Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia. Rule and Response (1859–1905)*, Ithaca, 1969.

be denied; and ultimately terminology must be regarded as less important than historical significance. With that preliminary caution, it is possible to define the élite with which we are concerned in terms of three principal criteria: education (especially in French); administrative or professional functions, arising from collaboration with the colonial government; and economic rewards, ownership of property, etc. It will be advisable to see these criteria in the context of Vietnamese traditional society, and not solely in terms familiar to students of Western society.

In pre-French Viet-Nam, as in pre-revolutionary China, the same three criteria had been of fundamental importance. To a far greater extent than in the pre-nineteenth century West, official advancement within the bureaucracy depended on education and success in an examinations system rather than on the mere possession of property. Very often, wealth derived from office rather than the other way round. As a result, there was a strong inclination on the part of a rising family to seek education and office, and not to move in the direction of economic enterprise that would lead directly to an increase in wealth. Property in any case tended to be communal, within the family or clan, and there was little in the way of legal security to protect private wealth from a jealous monarchy. The tendency to prefer education and office to business activity was thus deeply engrained in Vietnamese society before the French came, and it was only gradually left behind. Consequently, although the French-educated, *collaborateur* élite is sometimes called a bourgeoisie, its leading figures were not usually men who had risen to prominence through independent economic efforts. They were people who owed their success very largely to French approval, obtained through attendance at French schools and colleges, or through service in the administration. Even those who did acquire wealth without office tended to do so through opportunities for corruption or money-lending rather than through productive enterprise. Such a social pattern fitted in very well with French ambitions for their colony, which did not include independent economic development on a grand scale. In short, the Vietnamese élite of French Cochinchina was very much dependent on the French, perhaps inevitably so.

II

The French-educated élite of the 1940s in Cochinchina was both more numerous and more diverse than the handful of people who had been

thoroughly committed to French culture (and power) in the early days of colonial rule. Dr Osborne mentions by name only about a dozen Vietnamese prominent in French service in the period 1860–85; and whilst they probably do not include all those with any knowledge of French learning at that time, they certainly include all those recognized by the French as truly an élite. The situation of that time contrasts very sharply with that of the last quarter-century of complete French rule (1920–45), which is well reflected in a biographical handbook printed in 1943, bearing the title *Souverains et Notabilités d'Indochine*.[2] Of the individuals included in it 141 were natives of French Cochinchina, and they represent a fair cross-section of the people in the Vietnamese élite whose loyalty to France was (or was believed to be) beyond question. An analysis of this group of people will provide us with a valuable starting-point in the effort to understand the character of this element in Cochinchinese society. Eight of the 141 were women, who will be treated separately in due course: let us concentrate first on the 133 men.

They belonged to a wide range of age-groups, and it will be useful sometimes to distinguish between those born at different periods. The following figures indicate their age-distribution:

Born 1860–79: 50.
Born 1880–99: 70.
Born 1900 or later: 13.

The first group, aged over 63 years in 1943, were all men who had retired from regular occupations, though many of them still served on various kinds of committees and councils. They were, of course, representative of stamina as much as of any other quality; many of their contemporaries who had had equally notable careers were already dead. The youngest age-group, men under the age of 43 in 1943, is also peculiar in that it includes only those of that generation who had distinguished themselves whilst young: eleven of the 13 had been educated in France. The same generation included many people who, had French rule continued longer, might have qualified for inclusion in a handbook of this sort at a later stage in life: officials in the administrative service, for example, did not usually reach the higher grades till they were fifty or older. In many respects, therefore, it is the middle group which is most representative of the Cochinchinese élite in general, and some attempt must be made in what follows to compare the pattern within this group with the pattern overall.

[2] Hanoi, 1943; the work is very rare, the copy used for the present article being that on microfilm at the East–West Centre, Honolulu. The work is arranged alphabetically and page numbers will not be cited.

It will be useful to approach these 133 men and eight women through a number of different aspects of their life: in particular, their education (and religion), their offices and careers, and their wealth. The economic aspect must be left till last because it is there that the information in the biographies is least helpful. Under each heading it will be necessary to place the information about this sample of members of the élite against the wider background of social categories in Cochinchina.

Education. Information is given, or can be deduced, about the French education of 109 of the 133 men named in the handbook. In addition to those whose schools or qualifications are specified, they include 31 men whose education is not indicated specifically but whose careers imply some measure of education in French—mostly teachers or officials in the administrative services. The information is summarized in Table 1: the figures there relate to the highest level of education attained by each individual, which means that no account is taken of attendance at, for example, the Collège Chasseloup-Laubat, by men who later went on to study in Hanoi or in France. It is possible, in fact, to distinguish three broad levels of educational attainment in the table, all of them higher than that which the French referred to (in Cochinchina) as *premier degré*. First there was the level of the *deuxième degré*, which included several institutions in Saigon and one at My-Tho. The most important of them was the Collège Chasseloup-Laubat, founded in 1874 and named after the former naval minister whose persuasive voice had been responsible for French retention of Saigon in 1862.[3] Its *diplôme supérieur* was the primary qualification for entry into the administrative services of Cochinchina and the Government-General of Indochina, and since many of the people named in the handbook were officials, it is not surprising that it figures prominently in the table. Many of those who studied in France or in Hanoi, and also some of the 31 men whose education can only be deduced, had probably also attended there. In addition to its Vietnamese section, the college was also the school for the sons of Frenchmen in Cochinchina and a few Vietnamese boys attended as sons of men who had acquired French citizenship. By the early twentieth century therefore, the college was much more important than the three other major secondary schools in Saigon. Two of these had been founded privately in the early years: the Collège d'Adran (1862), which was a Church school but had originally been endowed with seventy government scholarships; and

[3] On this and other early educational institutions, see Osborne, *op. cit.*, pp. 105, 160.

the Institut Taberd (1874), intended originally for *métis* children. (It is not clear whether the three men of the 1943 handbook who had studied there were actually of *métis* descent.) A fourth Saigon school, founded somewhat later but growing in importance by the 1920s and 1930s, was the Lycée Petrus Ky, named after the first Vietnamese scholar to write extensively in French and in the Romanized form of Vietnamese.

Another early foundation which appears in the table was the Collège de My-Tho, which appears to have offered a lower level of education than the Collège Chasseloup-Laubat since many pupils proceeded from one to the other. In the early years of French rule, before about

TABLE I
Educational Background of 109 Members of the Cochinchinese Élite in 1943

Place of education, etc.	Whole group	Those born 1880–99
France, etc.	27	13
École de Droit (Saigon, then Hanoi)	8	6
École de Médecine, Hanoi	3	3
Hanoi: other institutions	4	4
Collège Chasseloup-Laubat, Saigon	19	11
École Normale, Gia-Dinh	3	3
Institut Taberd, Saigon	3	3
Collège d'Adran, Saigon	1	—
Collège de My-Tho	2	—
Other specified institutions	2	1
Institution unspecified	6	2
Career implying some education in French	31	15
Total:	109	61

1900, it was possible to go directly from the My-Tho college into the administrative service, but later on an education there ceased to be regarded as a qualification for entry on its own. Mention must also be made of the École Normale des Instituteurs at Gia-Dinh, just outside Saigon, founded in 1895 for the purpose of training teachers in schools of the *premier degré*. By about 1920 it had nearly 200 students, and some indication of the size of its task may be gleaned from the fact that there were then nearly 950 primary schools in the whole of Cochinchina. But the fact that only three people in the 1943 handbook had attended

the École Normale suggests that it was seldom the path to membership of the higher élite. A number of other institutions of secondary education grew up during the 1890s, notably the École des Mécaniciens Asiatiques; but none at all of their former pupils figure in the handbook. It would be wrong therefore to suppose that the 133 men who do appear there represent more than a small proportion of the Cochinchinese who had received a French education beyond the most elementary level. They are an élite within an élite.

Some of the 133 *notabilités* of 1943 had been educated outside the colony of Cochinchina: some in France, but some too in Hanoi. Thirteen of them had received the most advanced stage of their education in Hanoi, and another two had attended the École de Droit during the period before it was moved to Hanoi in 1917 (on the foundation of the University of Hanoi). Of these thirteen, none belonged to the oldest of our three generations (those born before 1880), and very few to the youngest group which was composed mainly of young men educated in France. This should not, however, be taken as an indication of a rise and then a decline in the importance of Hanoi as a centre of education for Indochina during the French period. On the contrary, the university there expanded considerably during the 1920s and 1930s, and by 1940 it was increasingly common for children of parents who had gone no further than Chasseloup-Laubat to be sent to Hanoi. That expansion, however, came too late to be reflected in the 1943 handbook, where only the very distinguished amongst those born after 1900 were qualified for inclusion. These were for the most part educated in France, whereas younger men educated only in Hanoi would probably not emerge into prominence until later in life, after 1943. The expansion of the schools and faculties at Hanoi, even though their standards were inferior to those of French universities, reflects a gradual increase in the educational level demanded of aspiring officials after 1917.

That the general level of French education within the Vietnamese élite was gradually rising during the colonial period is also reflected in the numbers who had attended university in France. Of the 27 men in the table who fall into this category, eleven belonged to the youngest age-group. Only three belonged to the oldest group. Of the latter, two were sons of leading Catholics who had supported the French from the beginning, namely Le Phat Anh and Do Huu Try; the other was Bui Quang Chieu, whose father had opposed the French conquest but who was selected by the colonial government to study abroad. These three were not the only people of their generation to study in France; by 1943 they were old men, and others of their age-group were already

dead. But they were part of a smaller and more privileged group than their counterparts of the generation born after 1900.

Dr Osborne notes that there were ninety Vietnamese studying in France as early as 1870, but these would seem to have been mainly Catholics attending secondary schools; few if any were able to enter universities.[4] By 1900 it was probably less usual for young boys to study in France, as the quality of schools in Saigon improved; but the number of university students was increasing, and almost all the 27 men in the table are known to have received university degrees. By the 1920s and 1930s, indeed, some Vietnamese were authors of doctoral theses. As regards subjects of study, which are specified in all but three cases, it is interesting that the 27 included eleven scientists, engineers and agronomists, six medical doctors and dentists, and seven graduates in law or commerce. None were students of the faculty of letters, although we know that some Vietnamese did study at the Sorbonne in the 1920s, notably the socialists Nguyen An Ninh and Phan Van Hum: such politically dangerous characters were hardly likely to find their way into a handbook like that of 1943, and we must continue to bear in mind this limitation of the source material. By the 1920s French education was by no means synonymous with loyalty to France.

One of the most interesting conclusions to emerge from this brief analysis of the educational background of the 1943 *notabilités* is the relative unimportance of the Catholic Church in their education. On the secondary level, far more were products of Chasseloup-Laubat than of the clerical institutions named after Adran and Taberd; and only one of the 109 people in the table (appearing under 'other specified institutions') had been educated at a seminary. Of those educated in France, too, only three or four followed the Catholic route to Marseille: most were educated at wholly secular institutions. Whatever the role of the Church in the early years, it would be a mistake to suppose that French cultural influence was wholly dependent on religion in the twentieth century, at least in Cochinchina. In Annam and Tongking the role of the Church was probably greater. It may well have been the case, in those areas, that Catholics were more ready than others to take up French in preference to traditional learning, at least before the 1920s. One must be careful not to apply too readily the results of the present study of Cochinchina to Viet-Nam as a whole.

Office and professions. The 1943 handbook gives fairly full information about careers, and it shows that 106 out of the 133 Cochinchinese men were, or had been, in either official posts or professional occupations.

[4] Osborne, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Amongst those with a professional training, most were in employment of some kind (usually, but not always, in government service), and no more than about half a dozen were in professional practice completely independent of any organization. These figures seem to support (not necessarily to prove, in themselves) the impression that Vietnamese saw education as the path to office, and hardly ever a means to independent enterprise, in business or any other field.

Information about these 106 people is summarized in Table 2; again the overall figures are compared with those for the middle age-group. It is possible to divide them into four main categories of career.

TABLE 2
Official and Professional Careers of 106 People in the Cochinchinese Élite, 1943

Career	Whole group	Those born 1880–99
General Administrative Services:		
(a) Cochinchina and Government-General	57	35
(b) Protectorates of Annam–Tongking	5	—
Military service	5	3
Teaching	14	7
Medicine	8	7
Legal service or practice	4	2
Agronomy, engineering, etc.	6	—
Canton-chiefs	7	2
Total:	106	56

(1) *General government service.* This is by far the most numerous category, including over half of both the whole group and the middle age-group. Most of the 62 people involved served, or had served, in Cochinchina itself, even though some were employed by the Government-General and were theoretically liable to be posted elsewhere in the Indochinese Union. Five people, however, all but one in the oldest age-group, worked for the governments of the Protectorates of Annam and Tongking. One of the most distinguished of them was Tran Van Thong (1875–19?), a native of Bien-Hoa who entered the administrative service of Tongking in 1907 and rose to be governor (*tong-doc*) of Nam-Dinh province, with the high rank of *dai-hoc-si*. Another, His Excellency Nguyen Van Hien (1877–19?), entered the government of Annam in 1894 and after a number of provincial appointments rose to be minister in charge of the palace between 1926 and 1932. But these were exceptional men, and in later generations there was either less need or less opportunity for men born in Cochinchina to follow their example.

For most, government service meant working in Cochinchina, but usually (at least at the higher of the levels open to Vietnamese) in a province other than one's own.

A not untypical career, of an official especially noted for his loyalty to France, was that of Tran Van Mang, born in Saigon in 1899. He attended, in succession, the Collèges of My-Tho and Chasseloup-Laubat, and obtained his *brevet* in 1917. Having entered the administrative service of the Government-General, he was soon afterwards sent to study at the École de Droit (Hanoi), from which he graduated in 1921. He then spent some years in an official post in Hanoi, before returning to a number of posts in Cochinchina. Having passed through the grade of *tri-huyen*, he was made a *tri-phu* in 1928. In 1930—during the demonstrations and near-revolt of some Cochinchinese provinces—he was sent on a special mission to Cao-Lanh to calm the area. Finally in 1936 he was given the highest kind of office he could expect under colonial rule, as *délégué* of Ba-Tri (Ben-Tre province); and in 1937 he rose to the highest grade in the service in Cochinchina, that of *doc-phu-su*. He was still in service in 1943, and had been honoured with the Order of the Dragon in 1941. He applied for, and was granted, French citizenship in 1928. Such men were essential to French rule in Viet-Nam, and were—in French eyes—amply rewarded for their services. But none was entrusted with the highest responsibilities. Not until 1945, after the Japanese interregnum (March–August 1945), did the French promote a Vietnamese to the office of provincial administrator: their choice fell on Nguyen Van Tam (born 1895), who had entered the administrative service in 1913, become a French citizen in 1927, and rose to be *doc-phu-su* in 1934 after being made *délégué* at Cai-Lay; he was now made *administrateur* of Tan-An province, and subsequently became prime minister of the Associated State of Viet-Nam (1952–3).[5]

The 57 people of this kind who appear in Table 2 were, of course, merely the cream of the administrative services. In 1938–9 there were as many as 159 Vietnamese officials in the *cadre supérieur* of men serving in Cochinchina, and there were perhaps another dozen or so people—for example interpreters—in appointments of a similar status.[6] Since the 1943 handbook includes many retired officials, of whom there was an indeterminate number at any one time, it seems unlikely that the 57 men named there would amount to more than a fifth or a quarter of the

[5] D. Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French IndoChina*, London, 1961, pp. 209, 283, 431.

[6] *Annuaire Administratif d'Indochine 1938–9*, pp. 544 ff. Of the 159, however, only about twenty were of the highest grade, *doc-phu-su*.

officials and former officials in the highest grades. In addition there would be a very much larger number of Vietnamese employed in lowly clerical positions, who may be said to belong to the élite insofar as they had some education in French, but who were never going to rise into positions of any prominence. Here again, therefore, we are dealing only with an 'élite within an élite'.

(2) *Military service.* Vietnamese were being recruited to serve under French leadership from the very earliest days of colonial rule, but only at the lowest levels. Apart from those Vietnamese who, later on, joined the French army, there was very little opportunity to rise to a position of any importance through a military career. Not until 1950 were the French willing to permit a wholly Vietnamese army with its own officers. Nevertheless, the 1943 handbook includes five Cochinchinese who had had military careers, though some of them may have been included more for their activities after retirement than for their military activities. Two military men are worth mentioning by name. Thai Van Chanh, born in Can-Tho province in 1874, entered the French army in 1893 and served in Madagascar (1900–5) and on the Ivory Coast (1905–8), then ended his career on active service in Europe from 1914 to 1916. He became a French citizen in 1896, and gained the *Croix de Guerre* in 1911 and the *Légion d'Honneur* on retirement. After returning to Viet-Nam he bought a salt-works and some land, and also became an active Buddhist, so that by 1943 he was vice-president of the Buddhist Studies Association. Of a much younger generation, Nguyen Van Xuan (b. 1892) was the first Vietnamese to attend the École Polytechnique (promotion of 1912). He served in the French army in the First World War, being decorated at Verdun, and rose to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel of artillery, obtaining French citizenship on the way. After the Second World War he became an active politician, and was prime minister, first of Cochinchina and then of Viet-Nam, between 1947 and 1949. He was, indeed, the first of a new kind of Vietnamese military officer which was to assume considerable importance in the political life of South Viet-Nam after 1954. But amongst the élite of 1943 he was virtually alone.

(3) *Professional service.* In the fields of general administration and military service, the French did no more than create in Viet-Nam their own versions of something that had existed in pre-French society. Those men who entered the former, in particular, did no more than substitute for the traditional education of a Confucian scholar some measure of French general education, on the whole of a more elementary kind. But the French also introduced the idea of professional skill,

based on specialized education in a selected field of study. To the extent that they permitted or encouraged Vietnamese to acquire an education of that kind, they had an important impact on both the culture and the techniques of government of the country. We have seen already that 27 of the 1943 *notabilités* were educated in France, and many of those specialized in a particular branch of professional study, notably agronomy, engineering, medicine, dentistry, commerce and law. A few others acquired specialized training of a less advanced sort at Hanoi, especially in medicine. Moreover, this type of education was becoming more common during the 1920s and 1930s. But only a small minority saw it as leading to independent professional practice, and they were probably men who had other sources of income, for example land. An outstanding figure amongst these exceptions was Dr Nguyen Van Thinh (1888–1946), who had studied at the Institut Pasteur in Paris and had written a doctoral thesis on beri-beri; but he was a large landowner as well as a physician. He entered politics in 1926 as a Constitutionalist, founded the Democrat Party in 1937, and in 1946 became head of the French-sponsored government of 'autonomous' Cochinchina; his tenure of the office ended in suicide.[7]

Most of the 18 professional men in Table 2 (excluding teachers, for the moment) were in some kind of institutional employment, and many were in government service. The oldest of them, and not the least distinguished, was Bui Quang Chieu (1873–1945), who had graduated from the Institut National Agronomique in 1897 and had been in government service from then until 1926 when he entered the *Conseil Colonial* as leader of the Constitutionalist Party.[8] Agronomy became increasingly popular as a field of study in the 1920s, and several of the youngest *notabilités* had qualified in it: for example, Chau Tam (to judge from his name, of Chinese origin), who qualified at the same institute in Paris in 1933 and then studied rice techniques in Italy before entering the Service d'Agriculture at home; in 1939 he became director of the École de Riziculture at Can-Tho.

(4) *Teaching.* Some of those who had acquired specialized qualifications, as well as some with merely a general education, became teachers —also a traditional activity for scholars in pre-French Viet-Nam. The teacher was held in almost as high regard as the scholar-official, especially in his own village. The growth of educational institutions

[7] Cf. Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Viet-Nam de 1940 à 1952*, Paris, 1952, pp. 66, 173, 270.

[8] For a fuller account of his career, see R. B. Smith, 'Bui Quang Chieu and the Constitutionalist Party in French Cochinchina', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 3:2, April 1969, pp. 131–50.

under French rule has already been indicated, and these had to be staffed by educated men of one level of attainment or another. The fourteen teachers in the table clearly represent no more than the tip of an iceberg. Two examples will indicate the kind of teachers who qualified for inclusion in the 1943 handbook. Nguyen Thanh Giung, born in Sa-Dec province in 1894, was educated at Chasseloup-Laubat and then at the University of Marseille, obtaining the *doctorat-ès-sciences* in 1923. In 1926 he became *professeur* at the École Normale des Instituteurs, and subsequently had posts at Chasseloup-Laubat and the Lycée Petrus-Ky, before becoming director of the Collège de My-Tho. Tran Van Giang, on the other hand, born near Tay-Ninh in 1874, went no further in his education than attending the Collège Chasseloup-Laubat (1892–5) and then served as an *instituteur* at Saigon and Tay-Ninh, until he became inspector of schools in Tay-Ninh from 1926 to 1931. He is included, presumably, for his administrative work in the latter capacity, and it was for that that he was made an honorary *tri-phu* on his retirement. The majority of the teachers in the handbook were in appointments at state schools, but one who was not deserves brief mention: Luong Van Hau (born 1897), who studied at the École de Commerce Supérieure in Hanoi and then taught at various private schools of commerce in Saigon, before opening a school of his own in 1930; he combined teaching with work as an accountant for several business firms.

(5) *Canton-chiefs.* Seven of the 1943 *notabilités* held the more lowly official post of *chef de canton.* But whereas the officials of the larger units of local administration were appointed by the central government from amongst its regular servants, the canton-chief was a local man selected from amongst the leading inhabitants of the villages within his canton. A representative career from those included in the handbook is that of Nguyen Duy Hinh (born 1874), of the village of Dai-Dien (Ben-Tre province). He held various appointments within his commune (*xa*), rising from *bien-lai* in 1893 to become *xa-truong* (village manager) in 1901, and *huong-su* (adviser on regulations) in 1904. He was canton-chief for twenty-three years (1913–36), and when he retired was given the honorary title of *doc-phu-su*; in 1942, he received membership of the *Légion d'Honneur.* He may well have owned lands, for he seems to have been a man of some substance, noted for his charitable work; but there is nothing in his biography to suggest that he owed his position in any way to education. In this respect, he and the other six canton-chiefs in Table 2 differ markedly from the rest; they may well have known French, but they did not need to be well educated (even by

Cochinchinese standards). These men were not part of the higher élite, in this sense; and indeed, only a very small number of them appear in the handbook. There were over two hundred cantons in Cochinchina, and only seven of them were included: far fewer than the proportion of higher officials included. The collaboration of such people was nonetheless vitally important for French rule, and their position in local society was very important. It would perhaps be best to regard them as the top level of an élite of a different kind from the French-educated élite whose life centred upon Saigon and the main towns. Yet to do so might be to run the risk of making too great a distinction between the two groups, for there were sometimes family relations between them. Nguyen Duy Hinh is a case in point: one of his sons, Nguyen Duy Quan (b. 1906) was educated in France, and with a *licence en droit* and *diplôme des hautes études commerciales* he entered government service and obtained, in 1935, an important appointment in the imperial service at Hue. Bui Quang Chieu was also the son of a canton-chief and honorary *doc-phu-su*.[9] In social terms, therefore, one cannot regard canton-chiefs as belonging to a separate class from the French-educated urban élite.

Wealth. The handbook of 1943 is much less helpful when it comes to a discussion of the economic circumstances of its *notabilités*, and a thorough analysis is not possible. One can observe that 17 of the 133 are specifically stated to have landed property or to be occupied mainly in the management of family estates, but it is hardly likely that these were the only people drawing part of their income from land. The paucity of economic information makes it impossible, unfortunately, to make any assessment of the extent to which education and office brought economic rewards. All we can do is to notice a small number of individuals in the handbook whose principal activity was the management of an estate or a business enterprise. The most outstanding example was Truong Van Ben, who must have been one of the richest Vietnamese of his day; he was a native of Cholon, born in 1883, and conceivably was of Chinese extraction. He is described as an '*industriel*', having been one of the leading figures in the move to develop Vietnamese industries in the period around 1918: at that time he had started a rice-mill and oil-mill, and in 1932 he added to them a soap-factory. In the interval he was director of the Société Rizicole de Thap-Muoi, which owned 10,000 hectares, from 1925 till 1932. In 1931 he was mentioned as owning 18,000 hectares, but it is not clear whether the estate was his personal

[9] Bui Quang Dai, of Mo-Cay (d. 1930), *La Tribune Indochinoise*, 25 April 1930.

property or merely that of a company.[10] He never held any office, but in 1918 he was elected to the *Conseil Colonial*; and two years later he was a member of the *Chambre de Commerce*, of which he was vice-president from 1932 to 1941; from 1924 he also served on the committee which managed the port of Saigon. Very few non-official Vietnamese can have enjoyed so much success in the economic field. There were, however, a few people named in the handbook who inherited the fruits of success from their parents and who were able to live a life of leisure. One such was Jacques Le Van Duc, born in 1887 in My-Tho province of a Catholic family. His father had been in the administrative service from 1884 till 1919 and had played an active role in the suppression of secret societies in the later part of his career; Le Van Duc himself, educated at the Institut Taberd and the university of Marseille, served for a brief while as *commis-greffier* in Saigon before retiring in 1913 to manage the family estates. Thereafter he was noted mainly for his endowment of three new schools and his travels in Europe and Asia. It is perhaps surprising that the 1943 handbook does not include more than a small handful of people of his type. One possible explanation is that in many families the estates were looked after by eldest sons who did not aspire to education or office but stayed at home to live a life quite different from that of their brothers: a life less likely to bring them into prominence in Saigon circles. Interestingly, Bui Quang Chieu was a younger son whose elder brother, Tru, lived at Mo-Cay and appears to have acquired neither a French education nor any kind of office. Here, perhaps, we have a part of the explanation why the information in the handbook is so weak on the subject of property and wealth; it was too complex a subject to be covered in biographies of individuals.

Nor is it easy to fill in this gap by reference to other sources. The materials at present available do not enable a comprehensive analysis of the wealth and property of the Cochinchinese élite; perhaps no such materials exist, for it was not the habit of Vietnamese landowners to advertise the details of their business life, and it was probably not of great concern to the French authorities to pry too closely into their affairs. The only statistical source which has any bearing on the problem is Y. Henry's survey of the agrarian economy in 1930.[11] In the fourteen provinces he covered, he found as many as 244 people registered as owners of over 500 hectares of riceland. But it was not his concern to

[10] Anh Van and J. Roussel, *Mouvements Nationaux et Lutte de Classes au Viet-Nam* (Publications de la IVe Internationale), Paris, 1947?, p. 66; citing a speech by Governor-General Pasquier on 25 Nov. 1931. The same source says that Bui Quang Chieu had 1,500 ha.; and Nguyen Van Kien (referred to below, p. 475), 5,500 ha.

[11] Y. Henry, *Économie Agricole de l'Indochine* (Hanoi, 1932).

identify them as individuals, and in view of the fact that his survey is based on the ownership-figures of cantons and villages, it is impossible to know whether he avoided the danger of counting some owners twice. Nor is it possible to know what proportion of the owners were Frenchmen. One thing, however, is clear: by far the largest number of these estates of over 500 ha. were situated in the provinces of the West, notably Rach-Gia, Bac-Lieu, Long-Xuyen and Sa-Dec. Those were the areas that were being opened up in the 1920s and 1930s, and it was likely that a successful Vietnamese official or businessman would invest his money there. The situation was, however, changing all the time, and one cannot be sure that the pattern of 1930 was the same as that of 1943. For one thing, economic pressures in the 1930s were making landlords charge proportionately higher rents, and forcing smallholders to borrow money at high rates of interest. Much land changed hands, and there was an opportunity for ruthless men with money to invest to acquire estates in all parts of the country, not just in the new lands of the West.

As in the fields of education and office, it is necessary to observe that not all major landowners appear in the 1943 handbook, and indeed the few individuals whose careers as landowners are most easily studied are not included there. A case in point is that of Tran Trinh Trach (born 1874), who was still living at the time of the land-reform of 1956–7, when he was reputed to own as much as 28,000 hectares.[12] He had begun life in a poor Chinese family of Bac-Lieu province, and had become a government clerk in 1898. As an interpreter between French officials and Chinese merchants, he had enough opportunity for private profit to retire in 1903 and buy some land. Money-lending enabled him to make ever greater profits, and by 1930 he had built up an estate of 15,000 hectares, to which he added a further 10,000 during the 1930s. His very absence from the 1943 handbook suggests that wealth alone was not a criterion for inclusion.

Before proceeding further, we should pause to mention briefly the eight women of Southern Viet-Nam who appear in the 1943 handbook. Five of them appear merely because they were wives, widows or other relatives of notable men. In a special category of her own, there was Madame Nguyen Huu Hao: a daughter of Le Phat Dat, who had been one of the most prominent of the nineteenth-century *collaborateurs.* She had married Nguyen Huu Hao, who belonged to another Catholic

[12] Robert L. Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam,* Cambridge, Mass., 1970, p. 24; information based on interviews in the province of Bac-Lieu.

land-owning family, but who had died in 1937; their daughter was chosen to be the wife and empress of Bao-Dai. She thus belonged to an élite-within-the-élite of Cochinchinese families which had both great wealth and the highest social acceptance in French eyes. Another of these five women was the grand-daughter of another early *collaborateur*, Tran Ba Loc, and had married a son of the famous Petrus Truong Vinh Ky. On the other hand three women amongst the eight could justify inclusion by their own professional careers. One was a medical doctor, trained in France and at Hanoi; the second was a teacher at the École de Jeunes Filles in Saigon; and the third was an actress, Le Thi Phi, who had emerged as the leading lady of the Vietnamese *cai-luong* (reformed) theatre which flourished from the 1930s. Although, as is well known, Vietnamese women had enjoyed a role of some importance in the background of Vietnamese social and political life, it was a considerable innovation for women to leave home before marriage and be educated for an independent career. These three professional women therefore represent the first beginnings of a very important trend indeed.

III

The handbook of 1943 has provided us with a basis of biographical detail for the discussion of the main characteristics of what might be called the 'higher élite' of French Cochinchina. Two groups of people, however, have not yet been discussed but must be regarded as belonging to the élite in a wider sense. One is a group which does in fact have a few representatives in the handbook: namely those people who belonged more to the traditional culture than to the nascent French culture of Viet-Nam, but were regarded as loyal to France. The second group is that of people who had a French education, but were not at all 'loyal' to France: on the contrary, they sought to oppose French rule.

Amongst the first group may be mentioned the three Buddhist priests in the 1943 handbook: all three were directors of temples ('pagodas') in the Saigon–Cholon area, and their careers were all similar. Huynh Van Phuoc, for example, born in Gia-Dinh province in 1883, entered the Giac-Vien temple at Cholon at the age of seven, and spent practically the whole of his life there. In 1941, he reached the highest Buddhist grade in Viet-Nam, that of *hoa-thuong*; and in 1943 he was director of the temple. In his own career he had no connection at all with the French-educated élite we have been discussing; but it is not impossible that he was related to men who became officials or

entered professions. Precisely why these three Buddhist monks should have been singled out, from amongst the very large number of directors of temples in Cochinchina, is far from clear; conceivably it was because of their relatives. Two other people may also be mentioned as part of this category: not monks, but men whose education had been in Chinese. Of Thai Xuan Lai, we know only that his education was in Chinese, and that in 1935 he was made an honorary *doc-phu-su* and admitted to the *Légion d'Honneur*. His career is not specified; he was born in Can-Tho province, and it is not impossible that he was in fact a leading member of the Chinese community. Nguyen Chanh Sat, born in Chau-Doc in 1869, may also have been of Chinese descent; but he was also a scholar, who did much to try to bridge the two cultures, traditional and modern. Until 1906, he was mainly a teacher of Chinese; thereafter he went into journalism and publishing, translating numerous Chinese books into the romanized script, *quoc-ngu*, and for a time editing the newspaper *Nong Co Min Dam*. But by 1943 he was an old man, and it is not easy to parallel his career in the younger generations in Cochinchina: amongst well-known literary figures, indeed, he has more counterparts in North and Central Viet-Nam than in the South.

Buddhism is not the only religion represented in the 1943 handbook. Surprisingly perhaps, only one Catholic priest born in Cochinchina is included there: namely Nguyen Ba Tong, born in Go-Cong in 1868, who in 1935 became the first Vietnamese bishop at Phat-Diem (Tong-king). But the handbook also includes a number of men who, though the fact is not stated, are known to have belonged to the new Cochinchinese sect of Caodaism.[13] In accordance with the precepts of that religion, their priesthood in it permitted them also to have a career outside (unless they were very high dignitaries), so that the people concerned appear as retired officials. Vo Van Thom (born 1868, in Vinh-Long province) was an interpreter in the *Service Judiciaire* from 1890 to 1915, and then a member of the *Conseil Colonial*. In 1926 his wife became a disciple of the founder of Caodaism, Ngo Van Chieu, and two years later he himself became active in the movement at Can-Tho. Nguyen Van Kien (born 1878, My-Tho province) served in the administration from 1898 till 1932, and retired as an honorary *doc-phu-su*; soon afterwards he is found as leader of the Caodaists of My-Tho province, though he was suspected by his rivals in the religion of allowing

[13] On the history of Caodaism, see R. B. Smith. 'An Introduction to Caodaism; i, Origins and Early History', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (London), xxxiii, 1969–70, pp. 336 ff. It includes biographical details of Nguyen Ngoc Tuong Pham Cong Tac and other leading Caodaists.

himself to be used by the French authorities to split the sect into two camps. Possibly others named in the handbook also adhered to Caodaism.

Not all the dignitaries of Caodaism were likely to find acceptance with the French, however, for many of them had shown by 1942 that they were anti-French and pro-Japanese. Some were even imprisoned by the government. For in Caodaism the traditional Vietnamese relationship between religion and politics found new expression, and it proved especially attractive to men to whom French education did not mean political commitment, as well as to some who found that it did not lead to personal success. Two of the most important Caodaist figures in 1943 were Nguyen Ngoc Tuong and Pham Cong Tac. Nguyen Ngoc Tuong (1881–1951) had a career not at all unlike those of many of the 57 administrators included in the handbook: he attended the colleges of My-Tho and Chasseloup-Laubat, then entered the administrative service in 1902; he had risen to the grade of *tri-phu* by 1930, when he retired to devote all his time to religion. He was of good family and education, and in other circumstances his headship of the Caodaist temple at Ben-Tre which he had founded in 1934 might well have qualified him to be regarded as belonging to the élite. His great rival in the movement, Pham Cong Tac (1893–1958), who became head of the sect at Tay-Ninh in 1934, was also a former administrative employee, but on the more lowly level of clerical work. He had retired in 1926 to play a leading role at Tay-Ninh, and by 1943 was in prison for his pro-Japanese sympathies.

The Caodaists, to a considerable extent, were turning away from their French education and seeking satisfaction in a new interpretation of a traditional religion. Other Vietnamese with a French education, especially amongst those who had been to French universities, turned away from both traditional culture and the opportunity for advancement under colonial patronage; often they became left-wing politicians. It is impossible to make the same kind of systematic analysis of their careers as was attempted for the *notabilités* of the handbook, but a few examples are well-known. Outstanding is the case of Nguyen An Ninh (1900–43), who attended the University of Hanoi briefly about 1918, before going on to study law in France. He returned with his *licence* in 1925, but by then he had already played a part in founding a French-language radical newspaper in Saigon, *La Cloche Fêlée*, and had written articles on the need for France to live up to its own ideals of liberty and justice in Viet-Nam. He never attempted an official career, but by 1927 had founded a secret society aiming to establish a socialist Vietnamese

state; for which he was arrested and imprisoned. He was again active in left-wing politics after his release, and in 1937 sought to organize an All-Indochina Congress, as well as a series of strikes. Once more imprisoned, he died in 1943 on Poulo Condore (Con-Son Island).[14] Two other prominent left-wingers, both Trotskyists, had also studied at university in France. Ta Thu Thau, who returned from France in 1932 after an active career in student politics there, was the moving spirit behind the Trotskyist newspaper *La Lutte*; his close associate was Phan Van Hum (born 1902), whose study of philosophy at the Sorbonne qualified him to be the theorist of the group, as well as author of works on Chinese philosophy.[15] Trotskyism was especially attractive to young French-educated Vietnamese, but in the event it was to play little part in an independent Viet-Nam, being unacceptable to the *Viet-Minh* and to the 'right-wing' nationalists alike.

IV

The foregoing analysis of the higher élite of 1943, together with some consideration of the limitations of the principal source used, gives rise to a number of questions about the nature of the élite which can only be answered by taking other evidence into account: for example, that provided by the French-language newspapers, whose circulation was confined to the French-educated community. In particular, one may ask how far this élite really was a homogeneous community, set apart from the rest of society. This question requires some examination of the institutional framework of the élite, which was far more elaborate in the 1930s and 1940s than it had been in the early colonial period.

The new institutions which developed during the twentieth century can be divided into three main categories: educational, economic, and political. The educational institutions actually attended by young Vietnamese seeking a French education have already been noticed. Socially, their effect would be to create the beginnings of a sense of community amongst their pupils and students, and this sense was reinforced by a number of other institutions to which former pupils could belong later in life. Especially important, perhaps, was the *Amicale des Anciens Élèves du Collège Chasseloup-Laubat* which was in exis-

[14] For details of his career, see *Avenir du Tonkin*, 5 May 1926; and the Saigon newspaper, *Dan-Quyen*, 15–16 August, 1964.

[15] Cf. M. Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan, *Introduction à la Littérature Vietnamienne*, Paris 1969, pp. 125, 211–12; and I. M. Sacks, 'Marxism in Viet-Nam' in F. N. Trager, *Marxism in South-east Asia*, Stanford, 1960, pp. 127 ff.

tence by 1919 when Bui Quang Chieu was its president.[16] It played an important part in the emergence, about that time, of the Constitutionalist Party under Chieu's leadership. Another group, open to a wider circle of educated Vietnamese, was the *Société d'Enseignement Mutuel de la Cochinchine*, founded about 1908; by 1918 it had seven branches in different provinces, and it continued to expand in the 1920s.[17] Several of the *notabilités* of 1943 were active in it, and it was said at one time to be closely connected with the Constitutionalist Party. These associations were composed mainly, if not entirely, of Vietnamese. There was also at least one cultural association whose membership was primarily French but which by the 1930s included a number of Vietnamese: the *Société des Études Indo-chinoises*, founded in 1883. In 1938 it had forty Vietnamese members, including corresponding members, and two Vietnamese sat on the committee; the total number of members at that time was just under 300.[18]

Vietnamese who studied in Paris were in a different situation, in that they were never more than a tiny minority within the institutions they attended. The first move to provide an institutional framework for Vietnamese in France was the creation of an *Association Mutuelle des Indochinois* in Paris in 1920. It was reorganized in 1922, and there were 34 Vietnamese at its inaugural meeting, in addition to the emperor Khai-Dinh and his minister Pham Quynh, who were visiting France at the time. During the 1920s study in Paris became increasingly fashionable, and in 1928 moves were made to create a *Maison d'Indochine* at the University City, which still exists there.[19] One of the significant features of these institutions is that, unlike those in Cochinchina itself, they brought together Vietnamese from different regions of the country, thus to some extent breaking down the regionalism which has always existed at all but the highest social levels.

The economic institutions of the élite included some which were essentially commercial enterprises, others whose purpose was the defence of interest groups. One of the most important, existing in most provinces, was the *Syndicat Agricole*. The earliest to be founded was that of My-Tho province, in 1912. Several are mentioned in the biographies of the 1943 *notabilités*, who played a leading role in their activities: those of Long-Xuyen and Can-Tho, founded by 1919, that of Vinh-Long, created in 1922, and those of Bien-Hoa and Ba-Ria, both in

[16] *La Tribune Indigène* (Saigon), 5, 29 July 1919.
[17] *Ibid.*, 27 June 1918; 5 March 1928, etc.
[18] *B.S.E.I.*, n.s., xiii, no. 2, 1938, pp. 253–63.
[19] *Trib. Indigène*, 15 Feb. 1921, 19 Sept. 1922, and 27 Aug. 1928.

existence by 1927. In 1919 there was also founded a *Syndicat National des Riziculteurs* to further the interests of landed proprietors.

Its establishment was part of a general attempt about that time, on the part of members of the Vietnamese élite, to break into the Chinese monopoly of commercial and industrial activity in Cochinchina; it included an abortive boycott of Chinese trade, and the setting up of a *Société Commerciale Annamite.*[20] The movement was not very successful, but it did give birth to a certain amount of Vietnamese business activity, and gave impetus to the attempt of Vietnamese landowners to protect their own interests as rice-producers. Truong Van Ben, whose career was mentioned earlier, was one of the most successful of those whose business activities began at this time. Later on, other economic institutions were developed, especially in the field of credit. The *Société Annamite de Crédit,* in existence by 1932, was run by a group which included several of the *notabilités* of 1943: its director was Le Van Gong (born 1896), who had gained his business experience working in French banks at Hankow and Tientsin between 1919 and 1926.[21]

The economic life of Indochina was at this period governed ultimately by the French, and it was Frenchmen who predominated in the councils which existed to regulate trade, agriculture, etc. The *Chambre d'Agriculture* and *Chambre de Commerce* each included two Vietnamese members, as against ten or more Frenchmen. In 1928 the Governor-General created a council to represent the major economic interests of the whole Indochinese Union: the *Grand Conseil des Intérêts Economiques et Financiers de l'Indochine.*[22] Of its 23 *indigène* members, as against 28 Frenchmen, there were usually about five or six from Cochinchina. In 1939 it was reformed, to exclude all nomination of members by the Governor-General and to allow for a wider range of interests to be represented. But just over a year later, in November 1940, it was suspended owing to the war situation and was never revived. Its successor, the *Conseil Fédéral,* constituted in 1941 and then reorganized in 1943, was entirely a nominated body, even though it had a majority of *indigènes* in 1943. Several of the *notabilités* of the 1943 handbook had played a part in these various bodies. A notable example was Nguyen Tan Duoc, born in Sa-Dec province in 1884, who had served in the administration from 1904 till 1918, then resigned to found a *Syndicat Agricole,* over which he presided until 1923. He belonged to the *Chambre d'Agriculture* from 1925 to 1938, and to the *Grand Conseil des Intérêts,* 1929–37.

[20] *Ibid.,* 5 Sept. 1919, etc. [21] *La Tribune Indochinoise,* 11 Jan. 1932.

[22] Roger Pinto, *Aspects de l'Évolution Gouvernementale de l'Indochine Française,* Saigon and Paris, 1946, pp. 54 ff.

Also, from 1922 till 1939, he was a member of the Cochinchinese *Conseil Colonial.*

If any institution in Cochinchina may be said to have been a focus of political activity of the part of the élite, it was the *Conseil Colonial.*[23] Founded in 1980, shortly after the appointment of the first civilian governor of Cochinchina, its early Vietnamese members had been men on whom the French could rely for docile obedience to whatever the government proposed. Dr Osborne suggests that many of them had too limited a command of French even to follow the proceedings, let alone to participate effectively. But during the second decade of the twentieth century, a new generation of more educated Vietnamese began to develop a more critical attitude to affairs, and began to express their ideas in the council. It was in this context that a group led by Bui Quang Chieu founded the Constitutionalist Party in 1917, and organized the anti-Chinese economic movement of 1919. Their demands for economic, educational and political change met with some small successes in the next few years. In particular, in 1922 the *Conseil Colonial* itself was reformed: previously it had eighteen members, including six Vietnamese elected by a mere 1,500 people, delegates from village councils; now its membership was increased to 22, including ten Vietnamese, and the latter were to be elected on a franchise which allowed about 21,000 people to vote.[24] This gave an advantage to the new urban élite, against the previous influence of village notables, and the Constitutionalists benefited from the change. In 1926 they had all ten of their candidates elected on the first round of voting, and were able to dominate the Vietnamese side of the council from then until the election of 1939, when three Trotskyists (Ta Thu Thau, Phan Van Hum and Tran Van Thach) defeated their Constitutionalist opponents. Although the council did not give its Vietnamese members any real power, it served as a focus for some political activity simply by virtue of the fact that it involved elections, and membership conferred status if nothing else. At least fifteen of the *notabilités* in the 1943 handbook were members of it at one time or another.

Another institutional development of importance for the growth of political, as well as cultural, awareness amongst the élite was the creation of a number of French-language newspapers owned by, or written by, Vietnamese. Here too the Constitutionalists took the lead, with *La Tribune Indigène,* founded in 1917; it lasted until 1925, and was later

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 43 ff.

[24] *Ibid.* and 'Rapport du Gouverneur de la Cochinchine, 4e trim. 1922', National Archives, Saigon, S.L. 366.

replaced by *La Tribune Indochinoise* (1926–42). Another early newspaper with a reformist tendency was Nguyen Phan Long's *L'Écho Annamite* (1920–31). During the 1920s, there were also a number of more radical French-language newspapers, notably Nguyen An Ninh's *La Cloche Fêlée* (1923–26); Phan Van Truong's *L'Annam* (1926–28), whose life ended in a major political trial of its editor and other journalists; and Ta Thu Thau's *La Lutte* (1934–39). But also there emerged a number of right-wing newspapers belonging to Vietnamese whose sole concern was to provide a focus of loyalty to the colonial government: for example, Le Quang Trinh's *Progrès Annamite*, founded in 1924 after a quarrel between Trinh and Bui Quang Chieu; and *L'Impartial* (1917–42), founded by the *métis* Henry Chavigny. By the 1930s, there was also an active journalism in Vietnamese, and although the *quoc-ngu* press was subject to severe censorship restrictions, the appearance of one short-lived newspaper or weekly after another showed that there was an increasing demand for literature of this kind, and an even more active desire to meet it. The seven daily (or triweekly) and nineteen weekly newspapers in Vietnamese which existed in Saigon in 1938 were the result.[25] They were, of course, not limited to a readership who knew French; therefore they are not, strictly speaking, within the scope of the present study. But both French and Vietnamese newspapers were important in helping to create a new kind of political climate, in which 'public opinion' could be a potential factor and in which a new kind of élite might begin to exercise cultural and political influence.

Yet when all this has been said, it is impossible to escape the fact that these new sorts of institution developed against the background of an older institutional framework. The imperial government and related institutions were no longer important in the South; but the traditional clan remained and may even have been strengthened by the vicissitudes of a country under alien rule. The kinship-group or clan, indeed, was so strong—even in 1943—that one is bound to confess in the end that a survey of the Vietnamese élite in terms of biographies of individuals cannot contain the whole truth about that élite. In certain respects, it is true, the individual was free to make of his life what he would or could. But his success was not exclusively his own: its fruits were expected to be shared amongst the whole of his clan, and property was traditionally a matter for clan rather than for individual decisions. Not all relatives, of course, would profit to the same degree from the success of a high official or a prosperous engineer: those closest would gain most, and others perhaps only indirectly.

[25] Counted from *Muc-Luc Bao-Chi Viet-Ngu 1865–1965*, Saigon, 1966.

Each of the 133 men and 8 women whose careers have been the principal subject of this study must be seen as a member of a kinship-group. It could well be argued that the real élite of Cochinchina consisted not of individuals so much as of a number of prominent families, within which these people were merely the most prominent individuals. Such knowledge as we have of these clans suggests that they were interrelated by marriage, usually through marriages arranged on the same economic level. Unless all this is taken into account, a mere statistical analysis of individual careers might carry with it the risk of being seriously misleading.