

Tom Truong

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Instructor Bich-Ngoc Turner

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Natural Resources and Diverse Topography: Attractions for Foreign Intervention in Vietnam

For my thesis, I will discuss the motivation and attraction of foreign intervention in Indochina for the French colonial empire. Today's land of modern Vietnam, used to be colonial territory owned by the French, calling it French Indochina. The French were intrigued by the idea of developing in a region that was in the vicinity of two rapidly growing external markets. Initially, their best move to attempt to rival the English in the current global market was to establish sovereignty between British India and China, which soon became French Indochina. The making of their colony, starting at the seaports helped them thrive economically on this land towards the end of the 18th century and a good part of the 19th century.

The purpose of this paper is to show how the unique geography that makes up the country of Vietnam became attractive to what natural resources it offered. The French were looking to enter the colonization race like the other European countries on developing territory. So for the first part of this thesis, I will be introducing the motives of the French empire entering the colonizing world to compete in the European Industrial Revolution. The French saw how Great Britain was already thriving in mainland China, so they wanted to partake intervene somehow. This came in the form of Indochina, which shared race relations with China from their long historical activity with one another. They figured out that this land met their expectation to open their global market with the abundance of mineral extraction, crop plantation and easy access trading upon the seaports.

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For a good millennium (938-1858), Vietnamese society was ruled under Chinese dynastic rule. But towards the end of the Chinese empire era in Vietnam, the French Revolution (1789) began to compete with Great Britain's Industrial Revolution. The English were able to capitalize in the global demand of industrial goods immediately, while the French initially had a slow industrialization process. This became the case, even though both countries showed similar real wages trends at the start of their respective revolutions (Sharp & Weisdorf, p. 82). That was when the French had started to grow interest to begin their own endeavor in East Asia, where Great Britain found success governing.

Since the French colonial empire was looking into doing something similar that the British were doing in mainland China, they decided to settle on what they ended up calling French Indochina. The colonists viewed this area to be, "...been subject to the Chinese empire..." and "...peoples who inhabit them resemble the Chinese..." (Brocheux & Hémery, p. 2), and that became the prejudice behind the naming of the territory. The French viewed this opportunity as their due diligence to help modernize an Orient society. Since other European colonies found success in expansion in Far East countries, like Indonesia (the Dutch) and China (the British), the French saw an opportunity to seize upon a society that was deemed similar to previous colonized land (Aldrich, p. 73). The influence of religion and the influencing of the Vietnamese language with the use of Latin characters, began the expansionism that the French wanted to utilize to exploit the land and the people.

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The extraction and exploitation of energy and mineral resources that boosted the development in industrialization today in Vietnam, actually started with the French when they colonized in the late 19th century. A huge market of French trade came from coal, which they exploited from Vietnam. The reserves of Vietnam's mineral group of fuel make up million tons of defined reserves throughout history that could be used to stockpile (Nguyễn Đ, p. 22). The French attitude towards taking advantage of this large supply of deposits in front of them. This made them able to maximize capital needed to focus in production. That had to happen to be able to hold a monopoly in manufacturing industries (*"Kết-quả là những xí-nghiệp lớn này nắm giữ độc-quyền ít hoặc nhiều ngành sản-xuất."*) (Nguyễn Trung V, p. 20). That's what happened for the French to gain an edge over the current global market.

This was exactly the case towards the end of the 19th century, with the rapid growth of coal production. Just from the Hòn Gai coal mine alone, it produced about 12,000 tons which allowed plentiful amounts of coal products to be marketed globally. From the year 1892 to the start of the 20th century, the tons of coal extracted from 95 to 201 thousand. (Nguyễn Khánh V, p. 28). The French really opened the potential of what the mineral exploitation industry can be within Vietnam, with a diverse selection of minerals to be found. The variety of minerals that provided industrial value to the colonists were, "...oil and gas, coal, iron, copper, boxit, lead zinc, Tin, apatit, minerals for building materials and some other types of minerals." (Nguyễn Đ, p. 22). These minerals met a plentiful amount of demands, especially to export to global markets.

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Besides coal and other natural minerals; rice, coffee, tea and even rubber plantations were established for high productivity and labor. Vietnamese farmers were used as laborers at a large scale in Vietnam and they were even forced to pay rent for the plantation and for agricultural tools (...*cho nông dân cấy rẽ, rồi nộp tô (phát canh thu tô). Bọn chủ đồn điền còn bắt nông dân thuê cả nông cụ...*) (Nguyễn Khánh V, p. 30). The use of Vietnamese workers also grew attraction as a tourist spot, as their exploited work was used to grow appealing fruits and vegetables. It has been said that, "...Cap Saint-Jacques (close to Saigon), Nha Trang (in Annam), Do Son (in Tonkin), and Kep (in Cambodia) became popular as seaside resorts. (Brocheux & Hémery, p. 187). The French didn't just see the seaports being the starting gateway to colonizing the land, but also a way to attract foreign visitors from around the world.

In addition to profiting off of the locals, the French colonial empire was also firm with trade tariffs abroad. The policy was that the goods imported into Vietnam from France were usually only taxed 2.5% of the good's value. While other countries now had to pay 5% tax of the same good. On top of that, the import goods that would be sent into Vietnam would had to pay between 25 to 120 percent of the value of goods from the import country, since the French stipulated a tariff to do so ("*Pháp lại ra một đạo luật mới quy định hàng Pháp được thuê, còn hàng các nước khác phải đóng thuế từ 25% đến 120% giá trị hàng hoá khi nhập khẩu vào Việt Nam.*") (Nguyễn Khánh V, p. 32). This was enacted to create a better relationship with the locals in Vietnam, to entrust that the French's intervention would be mutually beneficial to the development and modernization of Indochina. Also, competing with neighboring imports was

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already difficult with shipping costs from France to Vietnam. So through this special treatment for the Vietnamese to indulge in French goods, was used for the means of influence.

The idea was to follow the formula of Britain's expansionism, that differed from the first two French colonial empires that failed to make influence outside of Europe. To be able to spread the French influence of first religion (Catholicism, first established in the 17th century) and then free trade, was needed to try to match Great Britain's efforts outside of Europe. The British had brought new life to the idea of, "...imperial expansion, by informal means where possible and by formal annexation only when necessary." (Todd, p. 159). That was what the French colonial empire planned to do with Indochina.

The expectation of this ambitious colonization was exceeded, thanks to the Vietnamese peasantries who were both forced and reluctantly into work in the plantations, factories, and mines that were in their own soil. As of 1929, there were, "...53,240 workers in the mines, 81,188 in the plantations, and 86,624 in manufacturing and commercial enterprises...", that also rapidly grew in numbers a decade later (Brocheux & Hémery, p. 207). This was able to boost the speed and amount of capital invested in Indochina's economic sectors and it showed a exponential growth of private capital ("*Trong đợt khai thác I đầu thế kỷ XX, riêng vốn đầu tư tư nhân ở Việt Nam và các nước khác trên bán đảo Đông Dương là 238 triệu Fr vàng.*") The amount of private capital the French owned just from industry itself, was 177 piastres from 1903 to 1918 (Nguyễn Khánh V, p. 39).

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Nearly half of that made private capital was made from just mining work, showing the abundant amount of rice, metal, and coal material this land had to offer (Nguyễn Khánh V, p. 40). Besides natural fuel, the other reserves that were accumulated in the thousands and millions of tons were alloy (iron, titan, crom, manganese), other metals (bauxit, bronze, tin, lead), minerals (gold, apatite, phosphorite, graphite), and building materials (limestone, building stone, paving stone) (Nguyễn Đ, p. 23). These reserves made good use of producing commodities such industrial materials, medicine, and building materials.

The salaries given to the workers for their plentiful extraction tasks all depended on if they were a designated unskilled worker (*cũ nâu*), or a designated specialized worker (*áo xanh*). This mattered because it determined if the worker would get less than half a dollar a day (brown-colored clothing worker), or barely a dollar a day (blue-colored clothing worker). The salaries for women were even half an unskilled worker, no matter how much speciality they might have (Brocheux & Hémery, p. 208-209). This left the workers no choice but to be displaced to the most deprived areas of housing, as the French continued to colonize and industrialize land.

The French colonial empire initially found interest in establishing “naval supply stations” and “trading posts”, similarly to what the British did to the coast of Hong Kong. The question was where in the far east Asian region they could secure a foothold (Aldrich, p. 74). Their exhibition started in 1858, where they began from the ports of the south and slowly ventured upwards throughout the 19th century. It was through naval means that the colonists could expand

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into Indochina in the first place. For the first 20 years of the colonial era in Vietnam it was, “...for our Navy that the colonies are created.” (Brocheux & Hémery, p. 21). The French settled into the coastal city Tourane (Đà Nẵng) and that was used for the, “...chambers of commerce of manufacturing towns...” From there, French silk companies were able to do business there, including buying the majority of Chinese cities’ raw silk exports to make their presence known in that region (Brocheux & Hémery, p. 23). The French were able to succeed in their venture of ultimately intervening on British ruled land in China.

From the Vietnamese perspective, it has been said that the trading establishments made along the Mekong River Delta, was hard to access, which later motivated the colonial empire exhibition of northern parts of Vietnam. It has been said that the Red River up north had to be the most convenient transport route (“...*rằng sông Hồng là một đường giao-thông thuận-lợi hơn cả với Trung-hoa.*”) (Nguyễn Trung V, p. 22). This was the case because the French wanted to be in close proximity to valuable trades and exports they could gain from China, especially with the British being there also.

The French wanted to annex Vietnam some more in later colonial years, so they could make their way up to China. Saigon was the next appealing major place to take over since it was a major supplier of rice. Their plan was to resist any rice exports to be sent out to the rest of the country and from there, the colonists were able to siege the city of Saigon (Brocheux & Hémery, p. 25). The first industrial base was actually located there in Saigon, called the Ba Son Factory. They were able to make it into a port with many water vessels, that the majority of French ships

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ended up stationed at (...*nhập một số máy móc, ca nô, xà lan sắt. Nhờ đó, Sài Gòn dần dần trở thành nơi thu hút và sửa chữa phần lớn thuyền bè của Pháp hoạt động ở Viễn Đông.*) (Nguyễn Khánh V, p. 27). Besides getting the opportunity to exploit local workers with labor from the plantations and mines, the French also had convenient nearby ports for easy trading and export.

The French were able to close the naval gap competition between them and the British with this endeavour in Saigon. It was said that the, “...French engineers took the lead in the steam and iron-armouring technological revolutions...”, and the Navy became more powerful as more money was invested into it (Todd, p. 177). This development into the French Revolution showed that they wanted to take advantage of the free market of global resources and show that they’re a force to be reckoned with around the world.

Over the next 20 years of colonization in Vietnam, the French were able to establish into north Vietnam, where the French protectorate Tonkin was made. Finally getting closer to their main objective of their intervention into mainland China, the colonists were able to exploit the rich gold mines and the many coalfields that northern Vietnam had to offer. From this, the “Société d’études et d’exploitation du Tonkin (Society for the Study and Exploitation of Tonkin)” was created to attract interest from Hong Kong investors (Brocheux & Hémery, p. 33).

This is where the French colonial empire were able to struck gold in their exhibition, where they were able to establish their two highest capital companies, the Đông Triều and Bắc Kỳ (Tonkin) coal companies. From those explored coal mines alone, they were able to extract 1,683,000 tons of coal, which accounts for 71% output of all coal exploited in Indochina (“...sản

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lượng khai thác của Công ty than Bắc Kỳ là 1.683.000 tấn, chiếm 71% tổng sản lượng than của Đông Dương. ”) (Nguyễn Khánh V, p. 105). These two companies are part of the plentiful mines found in Quảng Yên, along the northeastern coast of Vietnam. As of today, the country of Vietnam has grown a reputation of supplying a good percent of the world’s coal, as it is the most important export. Specifically, anthracite coal from Vietnam is $\frac{1}{3}$ of the world’s export, especially to places in Eastern Europe and Japan (Nguyễn Đ, p. 51).

The question still remains if the French conquest onto the land of Vietnam, made into Indochina, was actually beneficial to the land and people like the colonists promised. Was the discourse of modernizing a society that once became independent from Chinese dynastic rule, justified by the actions acted upon the colonists? Some would say that the rural peasants, especially the ethnic group population, were negatively affected the most. The poor became poorer, as when unfortunate natural disasters struck the vulnerable land the peasants and farmers were displaced to. The rise of poverty from low wages became apparent, which led to famine, especially in Tonkin (Brocheux & Hémery, p. 204).

But, not all acts of French colonization were bad to the effects of Vietnam after them as the French had a lot of influence on what the country is today. Besides the food, language, religion and entertainment; the French had a lot to do with how today’s Vietnam structures their transportation and architecture. A part of colonial development in Indochina came in the form of a railroad system that was initially “an instrument of imperialistic penetration into China, but also as a means of connecting the multiple sites of the peasant economy with the new industrial

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poles and regional and foreign markets” (Brocheux & Hémery, p. 129). The Vietnamese were able to modernize thanks to French influence and ultimately came nearing development similar to China. A lot of agriculture industries are still relied on globally from Vietnam, especially when it comes to rice, coffee, and tea. Most importantly, Vietnam’s thriving economy relying on natural resources would not have reached this magnitude in the present day, unless the French colonists discovered what they needed to boost themselves in their revolution.

That concludes my analysis on how the French colonial empire viewed the land of Vietnam as an opportune venture to get their respective revolution off the ground. Indochina was favored enough to be one of the few far east Asian countries to not be occupied by European colonists, and the French wanted results the British were getting with China. Lucky enough, the French empire found economic prosperity coming from exploiting the natural resources and laborers Indochina had to offer. Along with that, the geography of Vietnam being along the coast opened up opportunities for accessible trade through seaports. Overall, for a good century the French discovered and thrived during a time when other European countries were doing as well.

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