Chapter 2

The Mandate of Heaven in Indochina, 1884–1930

Everywhere the French saw famine, they explained it as the outcome of improvident races and inhospitable environments. It was a tragedy of nature more than a problem of government. Responsibility for subsistence fell on some combination of individual foresight, free markets, and charitable goodwill. French colonial administrators understood their role to be philanthropist of last resort. In Indochina under the Third Republic as in Algeria under the Second Empire, this vague collection of ideas and practices—they never cohered at the level of theory or policy—left administrators wide latitude to act, or not, unconstrained by specific instructions or desired outcomes. Absent a defined obligation, caring for the hungry could always fall to someone else first.

This flexible stance toward subsistence left plenty of room for contextual variation. Similar ideas and actions had unpredictable trajectories in the unique complex of forces surrounding each famine. In Indochina, three characteristics of the colonial situation were crucial: the existence of a Vietnamese state with a historically strong obligation to ensure subsistence; the existence of means to do so in the form of dikes and granaries; and sustained oversight from European journalists and missionaries. In Algeria in 1867, only the last of these conditions had obtained. The French had suppressed the Ottoman state. Decentralized subsistence strategies, regardless of their efficacy, were relegated to the realm of ethnological curiosity rather than serious administration.

Journalists had drawn attention to the famine, but they had not done so in a way that demanded a response on behalf of the hungry. Indeed, liberal critics had faulted Algeria's military administration for doing too much, not too little.

When the French conquered the Vietnamese-speaking regions of Indochina in the second half of the nineteenth century, they encountered a centralized imperial state that had long dealt with famine both technically and ideologically. Confucian ideals of benevolent governance, including that of "nourishing the people," helped regulate relations between rulers and ruled.[1] In the fourth century BCE the Chinese philosopher Mencius had written, influentially, "When people die, you simply say, 'It is none of my doing. It is the fault of the harvest.' In what way is that different from killing a man by running him through, while saying all the time, 'It is none of my doing. It is the fault of the weapon?'"[2] Such teachings remained vital sources of legitimacy and guidance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They helped Vietnamese rulers, and indirectly, the French, claim the authority of ancient tradition through famine relief. According to neo-Confucian thinking, it was the obligation of rulers, communities, and landowners to ensure a minimum living for subjects and tenants.[3] Vietnamese lords were responsible for subsistence in a cosmological as well as sociopolitical sense. Famines were signs they had displeased supernatural forces and risked losing the "mandate of heaven."[4]

Compelled by Confucian norms of benevolent governance, nineteenth-century emperors, the "sons of heaven," implemented a variety of subsistence policies. Article 85 of the Nguyen dynasty founder Gia Long's 1815 legal code, which was closely modeled on that of the Chinese Qing dynasty, provided a framework for the care of the needy. These arrangements were expanded by his successors over the following decades. The Vietnamese imperial court in the central city of Hue required regular reports on weather conditions, crop yields, and rice prices. If these reports were unfavorable, the court had several tools available to stave off starvation, including tax relief, debt cancellation, and grain distribution.[5] Gia Long instituted a system of emergency price stabilization and aid based on decentralized provincial and community granaries. Centralized imperial stocks were made available in cases of dire need.[6] According to one estimate, the imperial state distributed fifteen million kilograms of rice between 1817 and 1842.[7] In the event of famine, mandarins—imperial administrators selected through a Confucian examination system—were held personally accountable. Article 85 of the Gia Long code stipulated that officials caught collecting taxes from famine-stricken villages would be fired and suffer one hundred strokes of the bamboo. Fraudulent claims on state aid were likewise punished with beating and fines.[8]

Alongside emergency relief, the court undertook long-term social and technical programs aimed at subsistence. The most important of these was water management. In the early nineteenth century, Gia Long, drawing on a centuries-long tradition, founded a department of dikes to build and maintain hydraulic infrastructure.[9] Dikes not only increased crop yields, but also protected against the killer floods that were a main trigger of famines in the region. In addition, emperors, who in theory owned all Vietnamese land, could reclassify property as communal. Controlled collectively by villages and legally inalienable, communal fields were meant to allow destitute people to grow enough rice for food and taxes. The state was complemented by civil society institutions such as mutual aid organizations and Buddhist charities.[10] These measures did not always prove satisfactory. In the late 1840s, famine and cholera killed ten percent of the population, almost a million people.[11]

In 1859, Napoleon III's navy began the French conquest of Indochina under the pretext of protecting persecuted European missionaries and Vietnamese Catholics. In 1862 and 1867, as Algeria starved, France signed treaties establishing the southern colony of Cochinchina. The Kingdom of Cambodia was made a protectorate in 1863. In the 1880s, France conquered the remainder of Vietnamese territory, forming protectorates over the central and northern regions of Annam and Tonkin in 1884. Laos was brought under French control in 1893.[12]

The French Indochinese Union created in 1887 was a patchwork of languages, cultures, and administrative jurisdictions. Cochinchina was a formal colony under direct French rule. In the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin, the French preserved the Vietnamese imperial state centered on the Forbidden City at Hue, grafting their administration onto existing institutions. Mandarins continued to take orders, subject to French approval, directly from the imperial court.[13] French administrators saw their job as "discreetly managing" Vietnamese officials.[14] Indirect rule gave France access to an established state apparatus with administrative capacity and political legitimacy. It also ensured that precolonial famine thinking remained in play.

French colonialism had an ambivalent relationship with the Vietnamese tradition of famine management. By maintaining continuity with the precolonial Vietnamese state, the French indirectly inherited its political and technical responsibilities. However, they also let many elements of the precolonial subsistence arrangement lapse. Communal lands lost their protected status and accumulated to the wealthy, both Vietnamese and foreign. Privatization of collectively held land, coupled with the cessation of periodic debt cancellation, swelled the ranks of sharecroppers and wage laborers. This, in turn, decreased access to direct food entitlements and increased exposure to creditors. At the

same time, the French raised tax rates, introduced new taxes (the one on rice wine was particularly detested), and eliminated tax exemptions for categories of people such as the disabled and elderly. Personal taxes were raised by a factor of five in Tonkin in 1897 and in Annam in 1908.[15] The French tried to fight the poverty they themselves generated by providing cheap credit for peasants, but tenant farmers and sharecroppers had no collateral to access it. The low-interest money instead found its way to the wealthy, who loaned it at usurious rates to the poor, unintentionally exacerbating the problem it was meant to solve.[16] Inequality widened and living conditions worsened, largely at the expense of the very poorest. More and more farmers found themselves in a state of permanent landlessness and indebtedness. By 1930, twelve thousand people in Tonkin, 1.25 percent of landowners, controlled 16.6 percent of rice fields. In 1937, French social scientist Yves Henry estimated that the average Vietnamese ate 182 kilograms of rice per year, down from 262 kilograms in 1900.[17]

As elsewhere in the empire, the French in Indochina rarely made the connection between policy and poverty. They believed that the people they called "Annamites," a label derived from a Chinese exonym, suffered from famine because they were naturally improvident, suspicious, hypocritical liars, lazy and fatalistic even when faced with death.[18] Unable to see the big picture from the vantage point of their little corner of land, the Annamites were incapable of planning for the future.[19] These characteristics made them naturally unsuited to survival in environments like the Red River Delta of Tonkin. Though much of the delta's farmland had the enviable quality of yielding two rice harvests each year, it was also densely overcrowded and prone to catastrophic flooding.

French racial and environmental determinism was tempered ethically and politically by Confucianism, and technically by Vietnamese traditions of civil engineering and grain distribution. The same mandarins who had been responsible for managing famines in the precolonial period continued to bear that obligation under the protectorates, in both a practical and moral sense. The continued existence of the imperial court maintained the precolonial expectation of state intervention in famines while keeping the ultimate burden on the Vietnamese rather than the French. In addition, French-language newspapers were active in exposing famine and criticizing the colonial state. The presence of an old and strong Vietnamese Catholic community ensured that parochial Christian care had greater material benefits than it did in other colonies, as more people fell within the Christian circle of concern. Administrators, mandarins, engineers, missionaries, and journalists all took part in the debates provoked by recurring famines.

This chapter considers the period from the invasion of Tonkin and Annam in the 1880s to 1930, when anticolonial resistance and reformist colonial hu-

manism ushered in a new phase in French thinking about famine. Of particular interest is the Red River Delta of Tonkin, which suffered from chronic precarity and frequent famines. The chapter does not proceed strictly chronologically but treats, in turn, certain particulars of the colonial situation in Indochina that affected how famines were understood and lived: the dynamic relationship between the French protectorate and the protected Vietnamese imperial state; the Vietnamese tradition of hydraulic engineering and grain storage; and the role of French journalists and Catholic missionaries in famine relief. These political and technical pressures tended to encourage attention, but this attention was rarely translated into substantive and enduring reform.

Food was a constant concern in the violent first decades of French rule in Tonkin and Annam. Fierce resistance to the French invasion between 1885 and 1889 threatened French power before it was even established and was accompanied by widespread hunger. A famine in Annam in 1897 killed thousands. In 1907, the Than Thai emperor rebelled and was forced to abdicate, and his son Duy Tan did the same in 1916, both years of dearth. Through this turbulent time, the questions of who was responsible for hunger and how best to address it were at the forefront of people's minds.

Administrators and Mandarins

Famine thinking in Tonkin and Annam was shaped by the relationship between the French protectorates and the protected Vietnamese state. This dynamic generated assemblages of ideas and practices drawing from sources including Confucian hierarchy, Vietnamese civil engineering, the colonial civilizing mission, market liberalism, and charitable philanthropy. The indeterminacy of responsibility allowed for flexibility. Policy was improvised according to the mix of political, financial, and humanitarian motivations in each particular case. The Vietnamese imperial court functioned both as competitor pushing the French to care for subjects and as scapegoat bearing final responsibility for famine.

The questions of how to intervene in famines and who should do so were already salient as France fought to consolidate power and establish legitimacy in the early, hungry years of its rule. Some colonial administrators believed the political benefits of Vietnamese antifamine measures would automatically redound to the French. During a dearth in Annam in 1889, one French official argued that "humanity supplements political interest for us to attempt even a partial remedy . . . at the least as an example of our active good will." His proposal to boost French humanitarian credentials was an irrigation scheme paid for and carried out by the imperial court.[20] The inverse of Vietnamese famine

relief as a path to French legitimacy was anxiety about Vietnamese corruption that could "render the protectorate odious to the populations." The French feared that Vietnamese elites would take advantage of the cover of French rule, "which the people hold morally responsible," to engage in graft.[21] Relying on the Vietnamese state came with advantages as well as dangers.

It was often Vietnamese rather than French administrators who favored humanitarian considerations.[22] In 1890, the imperial commissioner (*kham sai*) of Tonkin, fearing that a series of bad harvests and floods would lead to famine, requested a ban on rice exports.[23] The French customs service opposed meddling with trade in the name of freedom of commerce.[24] A customs official laid out the conflict as he saw it: protectionism ran counter to the principles of political economy, but Annamites were "not ready for liberty of commerce, not even knowing its name." Vietnamese might blame famine on French improvidence, but it was antithetical to civilizational progress to assume the role of "paterfamilias of the Annamite people;" even the most primitive races, out of instinct if not reason, should be capable of avoiding starvation without coercion. Export bans were intended to preserve rice for local consumption, but farmers had no choice but to sell their crop for tax money.[25] Torn between market orthodoxy and fear of famine, the French administration continually imposed and withdrew market controls without choosing a definitive course of action. In this case, the French never resolved their competing interests in free trade, public relations, and humanitarian concern.

When French funds were committed for famine relief, it was usually under rigid conditions for repayment. During a shortage in Tonkin in 1896, the imperial viceroy (*kinh luoc*) asked the protectorate to intervene. The French approved loans of cash and rice imported from Cochinchina on condition of "strict supervision" and repayment within two years.[26] The administration's careful accounting was on display when exactly two years later, the resident-general of Tonkin complained that only 4,677.92 piastres of the 4,718.02 owed by one district had been collected. He demanded the balance immediately.[27]

French competition with the Vietnamese imperial state, belief in the free market and liberty of commerce, and charitable sentiment did not together form a consistent approach to famine. Rather, the weight of these various motivations shifted according to circumstance. In 1897 and 1898, several districts in Annam were hit successively by drought, locusts, and floods. In the environs of Hue, administrators encountered gaunt beggars barely covered with miserable rags, legs and feet swollen, sitting alongside the roads hoping for the pity of passersby. Every morning, several people were found dead in the streets of cold and hunger. Others fled to the mountains to pillage the granaries of ethnic minorities. A French functionary confirmed that rumors of "the

darkest colors" had not been exaggerated: "The misery is extreme, one encounters at every step on the roads individuals who have nothing left but their breath, veritable skeletons covered in an envelope of skin!" There were so many dead that they were simply buried where they lay without any thought of proper ritual. Mortality was impossible to calculate, but according to one estimate over six thousand people died.[28]

The 1897 famine raised concerns about "political" consequences, a euphemism that usually referred to law, order, and the stability of French rule. The Annam countryside suffered from arson, pillage, and murder as starving men armed themselves with sticks and formed roving bands of thieves between ten and thirty strong. The population, some officials feared, had been pushed by hunger, taxes, and forced labor to the verge of a general revolt. The people lacked only a leader to organize them.[29] The French suspected this potential leader might well be the powerful court official Hoang Cao Khai, their "most mortal enemy." Administrators thought that Hoang Cao Khai and other mandarins, more interested in petty rivalries than in public well-being, saw famine as an opportunity for financial speculation and political advantage. Hoang Cao Khai was liable to start a rebellion simply to consolidate his personal power in Annam.[30] It was the French, though, who had elevated Hoang Cao Khai to the powerful role of imperial viceroy of Tonkin, as a reward for his support during the conquest of the 1880s. The fact that he was often praised as one of France's staunchest allies and reviled by many Vietnamese as a collaborator only highlights the protean character of Franco-Vietnamese relations.[31]

In response to the issues of security, legitimacy, and humanity raised by the 1897 famine, the Hue court reinforced military units, shipped rice, and issued an imperial edict appealing to rich people's spirit of solidarity. Hoang Cao Khai personally opened a charity drive. Nonetheless, the French did not trust the Vietnamese state to handle the famine. Proposals such as subsidies for officials charged with rice distribution, a pawning scheme that would allow the rich to amass valuables at low cost, and promotions for generous mandarins were seen, not unreasonably, as self-interested. The French accused mandarins of using their control of granaries to sell subsidized grain on their own behalf at a markup.[32] Much of the emergency rice was hoarded by officials or left to rot on roads and in junks, never arriving where it was needed. When the imperial granaries of Hue were opened, the spoiled rice within dated to the reign of the Minh Mang emperor fifty years earlier.[33] The French interpreted the Vietnamese court's response as unforgivably careless and even, in the case of mandarin corruption, criminal.

Upset by what they interpreted as the callousness of mandarins, the French pushed the imperial court to transport and distribute rice without regard to

cost. Overriding Vietnamese ministers, French administrators arranged for reserve grain to be released for free rather than demanding money or labor from people enervated by hunger. They ordered that grain requisitions be sent directly to famine areas rather than to Hue, postponed labor conscription, and opened public works.[34] The administrators hoped these measures would earn the trust and recognition of the people, that "the sacrifices made will not have been useless."[35] The Annam famine of 1897 illustrates how the French simultaneously relied on and competed with the Vietnamese imperial state.

As France progressively secured power over the court and the population in the early twentieth century, relations with mandarins continued to affect famine relief. Vietnamese officials could be self-interested, but they could also serve as the conscience the French sometimes seemed to be lacking. In 1906, a low-level official named Doan Chien wrote a lengthy letter to his superior the French resident, head of the province of Ninh Binh in Tonkin. After successive typhoons and lost harvests, farmers in Doan Chien's district were trapped in a vicious cycle of debt. They had managed to survive for a time by borrowing, working for wages, and pawning ancestral heirlooms. But now the worst famine in memory was upon them. Even the well-off, having depleted their resources in the spirit of mutual aid, were now bereft. The poorest were eating wild plants and banana roots. The men Doan Chien tasked with distributing rice reported that nine out of ten of the destitute could be mistaken for skeletons. Some had gone a full week without food. Hundreds died. Charity and government advances had provided forty thousand piastres for relief, but Doan Chien estimated an additional one hundred thousand piastres were required. This was a substantial sum, but failing to make the request would be a neglect of duty and would shame him in front of his people.[36] His words moved the resident of Ninh Binh, who forwarded the request up the chain of command.[37]

In addition to motivating French action, Doan Chien and other mandarins provided French administrators with a degree of information often unavailable in other colonies. From the mandarins' reports, the French learned, in some cases, the exact number of people suffering from starvation in each village, the names of the women, children, and elderly at risk, the number of people who had left to seek work, and the amount of rice on offer from individual merchants.[38] The detailed data provided by mandarins allowed and pressured the French authority to "show the native population that it is not indifferent to its misfortune."[39]

As mandarins held them accountable, French administrators in turn pushed mandarins to fulfill their Confucian responsibilities. "From time immemorial," the French believed, emperors had urged mandarins to purchase promotion

with charitable donations as a supplement to official grain distributions.[40] Continuity with such precolonial practices encouraged relief while easing moral and financial pressure on the French administration. During the Red River Delta famines of 1906 and 1916, Vietnamese officials could earn formal promotion through personal donations.[41] French decorations such as the Legion of Honor supplemented mandarin grades as incentives for charity.[42] Administrators seized on promotion and praise as cost-effective solutions, even as they worried that it risked cheapening both.[43]

Famine relief blurred the distinction between governance and philanthropy, fueling an economy of generosity, gratitude, and spectacle. Even in their official capacities, Vietnamese and French authorities often requested and granted aid using the language of charity and personal virtue. In 1906, a savvy mandarin in the Red River Delta province of Nam Dinh wrote flatteringly to his French supervisors. The inhabitants of his district, he claimed improbably, were all talking about how ably the French fed them. He had even posted his relief instructions on his office door as a public testament to French generosity.[44] True or not, the mandarin knew his French superiors would appreciate learning of their good reputation among the people. After flooding in Annam in 1910, the Council of Regents that ruled in the name of the child emperor Duy Tan profusely thanked the governor-general for his "generosity" in committing budget funds for aid, promising to make this act of "charity" known to the emperor and the population.[45] Likewise, the highest-ranking French official in Annam, the resident-superior, voiced extravagant gratitude on behalf of the Vietnamese government, the population, and himself.[46] Though budget funds were disbursed through official channels, they retained a flavor of Napoleon III's philanthropy for Algeria. State relief as an expression of personal character made it inconsistent, as some administrators proved more beneficent than others.

Vietnamese charity played a major role in famine relief through World War I. In the Red River Delta in 1916, a newspaper reported that death struck down Vietnamese civilians just as surely as it did French troops assaulting enemy trenches. "Hunger replaces 75 mm batteries and various illnesses represent machine guns."[47] The colonial administration again turned to the generosity of notables such as Trang Ngoc Quang of Nam Dinh, who conserved "the habit of doing good toward the poor" by distributing rice nine times a month. As many as five thousand people attended each distribution.[48] A mandarin in Ninh Binh province, Hoang Van Canh, convened a meeting of notables to organize charity. He used the example of the French resident-general of Tonkin to shame his countrymen into action. This Frenchman, Hoang Van Canh gushed, distributed aid with his own hand, unable to eat or sleep, sharing the

hunger of the people, worrying day and night. How could compatriots of the Annamite race who honored the same ancestors "remain emotionless when we see our fellows dying of hunger next to us while we live in affluence?" The generous, according to Hoang Van Canh, would be recognized not only by Providence, but by the resident-general himself, who would inscribe their names on a list to be preserved in memory for long centuries.[49]

Cooperation and competition between French and Vietnamese officials could bolster relief or could just as easily give cover for state negligence and personal corruption. French complaints of mandarin graft were often instrumental, but rarely baseless. The famines of 1906 and 1916 saw numerous cases of Vietnamese using their positions to enrich themselves at the expense of the hungry. Some of this amounted to simple theft.[50] In Nam Dinh, the people of Van Bang village protested that emergency rice had been stolen by a local official.[51] But it was not necessary to break the law to profit from suffering. The wealthy were often motivated by cheap land prices offered by desperate smallholders more than by titles or honors, contributing to the inequality that increased vulnerability to future famines.[52] Villagers complained that merchants hoarded rice to sell at extravagant famine prices.[53] The synthetic Franco-Vietnamese responsibility for famine was fluid enough to fit a variety of needs, some honorable and some less so.

Water and Rice

In 1903, 1904, and especially 1905, violent typhoons flooded large areas of Tonkin and Annam. In June 1903, winds uprooted Hanoi's trees and tore the roofs off buildings. Pedestrians hacked their way through the debris with hatchets. Junks and sampans seeking to escape the storm near Nam Dinh were carried off and sank, killing two thousand people in less than an hour.[54] The same thing happened in 1904 when boats sheltering in Ha Long Bay were surprised by a typhoon.[55] In Hue, a French correspondent joined hundreds of Vietnamese taking refuge under a pagoda. After the roof blew away, they spent all night exposed to the elements, watching animal carcasses float by in the flooded streets. The wind leveled the city's Vietnamese neighborhood, which was more vulnerable than the European and Chinese quarters. The hospital collapsed on top of patients.[56] Newspapers reported as many as two thousand residents dead.[57] The next year, people needed boats to navigate the inundated countryside of Ninh Binh.[58] These repeated, relentless floods contributed to the serious famine of 1906.

The fact that flooding frequently triggered famines in Indochina accounted for some particularities of French thinking in the region. Floods could be controlled more easily than droughts. If famine resulted from backward races and hostile environments, the impact of the second of these factors could be softened through technical means. Following a long history of associating the spirit of the laws in the Orient with water management, French administrators saw hydraulic engineering as a key to state building in Asia. Constructing and maintaining the precolonial network of dikes that allowed cultivation and protected from floods was difficult. It necessitated a level of investment and surveillance that only a centralized state was capable of. Construction involved the work of elephants, in most cases too expensive to be privately owned. Once built, the system required constant repairs and an extensive bureaucracy to collect and archive information. Water levels needed to be continuously monitored and compared with historical records filed in Hue to ascertain the risk of disaster.[59] At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Gia Long united these functions under his department of dikes.

French administration had continuity not only with the abstract Confucian responsibility for famine, but also with precolonial physical infrastructure. Many observers admired the roughly 1,200-kilometer network of dikes in the Red River Delta, most of which predated the Nguyen dynasty. Even so, they acknowledged its shortcomings.[60] The dikes were periodically overwhelmed by the severe floods that, according to Vietnamese belief, struck roughly once a decade. As early as the 1890s, French engineers put forth comprehensive hydraulic programs to bring the network up to date.[61] These plans proved too expensive for the budget-conscious administration. Instead, it resorted to cheaper stop-gap measures such as renovating precolonial dikes and drainage canals that had fallen into disrepair.[62]

French fears were borne out when successive years of flooding triggered famines in the Red River Delta in 1906 and 1916. A Franco-Vietnamese commission that met twice after the 1906 famine urged against the "illusion" that palliative relief could make up for the inadequacy of the water regime.[63] When ten years later flooding again led to famine in the delta, a council of mandarins in Nam Dinh duly praised the achievements of precolonial engineers while pointing out persistent problems. It attributed the famine of 1916 to the inadequacy of drainage canals for evacuating floodwater from farmland. The council approved the renovation of a precolonial protective dike around the city of Nam Dinh, which the Tonkin protectorate had allowed to deteriorate. But like the commission of ten years earlier, the council, too, emphasized that a wholesale rethinking of the delta's infrastructure was in order.[64]

The now-retired high mandarin Hoang Cao Khai took the radical position that the entire system of dikes should be phased out. In a lengthy technical treatise responding to the floods of 1915, he situated his proposal within a long history of civil engineering that had begun with a dike built by the Ly dynasty (1009–1225 CE) to protect Hanoi. Efforts to build a comprehensive system to tame the length of the Red River, he believed, dated to the later Tran dynasty (1225–1400 CE). Dikes had broken throughout this history. But the previous hundred years, Hoang Cao Khai wrote, had seen a gradual rise of riverbeds increase the risk of ruptures. Flooding had intensified due to deforestation in China's Yunnan province, where the sources of the Red, Black, and Clear Rivers were located. As flooding grew more deadly, riverside populations built unofficial protective dikes, preventing drainage and exacerbating the rise of riverbeds. These uncoordinated local structures rendered the system incoherent. Floods during the reign of the Tu Duc emperor (r. 1847–1883) prompted a debate about whether the maintenance of the network was worth the enormous cost. The question remained unresolved when the French invaded and was now more urgent than ever.[65]

Hoang Cao Khai surmised that to protect against the worsening floods caused by rising riverbeds, dikes would need to be heightened and strengthened at huge expense. Higher dikes, in turn, would raise riverbeds by allowing sediment to accumulate, initiating a vicious circle. The whole system, Hoang Cao Khai suggested, should simply be dismantled. He conceded that eliminating the dikes would lead to temporary hardship for flooded populations. In the long term, though, sedimentation would slowly raise the level of riverside land, eventually allowing farmers to cultivate once more. The whole project would be overseen by an updated version of Gia Long's department of dikes.[66]

Hoang Cao Khai weighed in on a controversial question in Red River hydrology: that of the dike at Vinh Yen. This area functioned as a natural floodplain when the river overflowed its banks. The local administration often intentionally breached the dike to protect Hanoi downriver. This always destroyed crops and sometimes killed peasants who had not been forewarned, as in 1904 when an intentional rupture drowned at least four people.[67] The controversy continued beyond Hoang Cao Khai's contribution. In 1917, a French landowner reported that the administration forced people to cut the dike and flood their own fields and villages to divert floodwaters from Hanoi.[68] In 1926, the head of the public works service complained about the population's opposition to flooding Vinh Yen.[69] As late as 1945, the Viet Minh chastised the French for sacrificing Vietnamese to protect the European population of Hanoi, republishing a 1909 tract that explained, "When the waters rise excessively, and the dike protecting Hanoi threatens to break, the simple rem-

edy consists of rupturing the dike above Hanoi and on the opposite bank, thus flooding the entire province of Vinh Yen, drowning livestock and, if needed, natives; in any case the harvest is destroyed." Once the threat to Hanoi dissipated, the ruined peasants were asked to rebuild the dike they had been compelled to demolish.[70] In his 1915 essay, Hoang Cao Khai observed that as the system stood, floodwaters had to drain at either Vinh Yen or Hanoi. The administration always chose to protect Hanoi by opening the dike at Vinh Yen, where "the population, receiving no prior warning, and thinking itself safe behind the dike that protects it, continues fieldwork." To avoid such "complications," it would be better, he thought, to dismantle the dike and create a permanent reservoir.[71]

A French engineer took issue with Hoang Cao Khai's assessment, offering an alternative history of Vietnamese water control. The system, the engineer wrote, originated in ancient times not with centralized construction but with local community dikes only later taken over by the state. Because each community was concerned with its own needs without a view of the big picture, the Red River system became tortuous and incoherent. This situation persisted into the present day. Furthermore, Annamite engineers had lacked the expertise to determine the dimensions needed to contain the most severe floods. His Excellency Hoang Cao Khai, like Vietnamese experts before him, paid more attention to appearances than to calculations. What he interpreted as stronger flooding due to deforestation and sedimentation was actually the consequence of stronger dikes built by the French without corresponding outlets. These dikes broke less often, making the riverbed appear higher. Vietnamese dikes, the engineer argued, had always been too low to contain the most serious floods. He condescendingly speculated that if Vietnamese engineers had been capable of correctly calculating the necessary dimensions, "It is probable that they would have been frightened and would perhaps not have undertaken the construction of dikes."[72]

Given the unfeasibility of building dikes capable of completely containing the Red River, the engineer argued for the creation of outlets to evacuate floodwater. He defended the repeated decision to break the dike at Vinh Yen, arguing that this saved not only Hanoi, but also thousands of hectares of rice paddies lower in the delta. The flooding also fertilized fields with deposits of alluvial sediment. The engineer believed that had the Vinh Yen dike been opened in 1915, deadly flooding would have been prevented. He did not mention the failure of this strategy in 1906. Along with improved drainage, it would be necessary to raise and reinforce the dikes, not to the impossible height of the strongest floods, but to practical and safe dimensions. As for the creation of a department of dikes, he agreed in principle, but the teams of dozens of

trained hydraulic specialists that managed rivers in Europe were simply not available in Indochina. In short, the engineer summed up, Hoang Cao Khai's proposal to get rid of the dikes was preposterous.[73]

The administration never seriously considered dismantling the dikes, but the debate raised enduring questions of costs and benefits. In 1926, the Red River flood was measured at a record level of nearly twelve meters. Contradicting Hoang Cao Khai's hypothesis that flooding was getting more extreme, the public works service attributed the measurement to the strengthening of dikes earlier in the decade. Unlike precolonial dikes, the reinforced ones did not break. They were breached only when the water exceeded their height. This achievement contrasted with the "sad bitterness" of Tu Duc's failure to control floods of a mere nine meters in the 1870s. French success, however, made the system more rigid and potentially explosive. Expanding the riverbed to relieve pressure was one possible solution, but this would counter a thousand-year effort to contain the river as narrowly as possible to maximize paddy land in the crowded delta. On the other hand, increasing the capacity of the riverbed without widening its banks risked decreasing the frequency but strengthening the intensity of floods in the event of a breach.[74] These issues were not resolved. Projects to improve the system continued through the 1940s in a piecemeal way, but so did uncontrolled floods. Between technical challenges and budget constraints, the wholesale rationalization proposed by some engineers was never achieved under the French. Yet the very possibility of technical solutions made flooding, and thus famine prevention, a pervasive state concern.

Just as the French relied on and were constrained by Vietnamese river engineering, they had to contend with the legacy of Vietnamese granaries. In the nineteenth century, subsistence granaries were administered primarily at the village and provincial levels. In addition, the imperial court in Hue stocked granaries for the use of officials and soldiers, sometimes opening them to the public in emergencies. Information on granaries under the French is thin and contradictory. It appears that provincial state granaries were suppressed shortly after the conquest of Tonkin and Annam, leaving emergency grain storage to community initiative.[75] Subsequent debates about whether to reestablish official granaries pitted the modernizing colonial project against the necessity of leaning on precolonial ideologies and institutions. The recent memory of state granaries forced a discussion about relief during the famines of 1906 and 1916. Most officials concluded that granaries were inefficient, expensive, conducive to corruption, and anachronistic in a modern market economy.

During the 1906 Red River Delta famine, the absence of granaries loomed large as administrators sought to balance interests in relief, liberty of com-

merce, and, perhaps decisively, cost. Governor-General Paul Beau second-guessed his predecessors' suppression of precolonial granaries, wondering if responsible French leadership might have salvaged a conceptually sound system ruined by corrupt Annamite execution.[76] To resolve the question, European and Vietnamese functionaries were asked to compare the impact of the 1906 famine with a counterfactual scenario in which a granary system had been in effect.[77] Several respondents recommended the reinstitution of state granaries, usually at the village or district level rather than the provincial level as under the Nguyen.[78] However, most French and Vietnamese administrators thought looking to the past would interfere with modern progress. For reasons of efficacy and of optics, the administration concluded that "besides admitting it was a mistake to let [the granaries] disappear, there would today be no benefit to restoring them."[79] The French considered and rejected farming cooperatives and mutual aid societies as inappropriate to improvident and suspicious Annamites. Instead, the administration settled on emergency cash funds under French control.[80] Each province in Tonkin was ordered to stock capital so as "to no longer be at the mercy of natural phenomena or atmospheric accidents."[81] There is no evidence these orders were followed. In any event, the funds were not available during subsequent crises.[82]

The granary debate was rehashed in the following years as though it had never occurred. Whenever the issue arose, many functionaries, both French and Vietnamese, argued that precolonial granaries had been plagued by fraud, corruption, and deterioration of stocks. Even when granaries functioned properly, they had been designed for a premodern world that only utopians were nostalgic for. Though it was "very nice to remember the granaries of the old regime," they made sense only in a situation of economic protectionism and poor transportation. They were "a sign of infancy or weakness in a people."[83] Under the French, preventing famine was easy: simply allow markets to function freely, and fluke accidents like the 1906 famine would be avoided.[84]

Others were less sanguine about liberty of commerce as the definitive solution to famine. One mandarin felt that just as "bees know how to procure flowers in spring to feed themselves in winter," true compassion demanded foresight. He, too, looked to the precolonial period for inspiration, recalling that the imperial court had constituted an emergency cash fund as well as granaries. Though the money had been squandered by ignorant Annamites, such a fund could be restored under the competent supervision of the French, thereby avoiding the waste associated with granaries as well as the indifference of markets.[85] Just such funds were supposed to have been capitalized in 1907, but clearly did not exist when the mandarin wrote these words in 1910. This lack of follow-through was a hallmark of French rule. The same debates,

influenced by the persistence of precolonial dikes and the memory of precolonial granaries, were repeated over and over. They led to few concrete results.

Missions and Newspapers

The Vietnamese imperial state and its legacy of dikes, granaries, and Confucian noblesse oblige drew the French colonial authority's attention to famine while relieving it of final responsibility. Missionaries and the French-language press added Christian and liberal traditions of care to the mix of pressures on the colonial state. At the time of the conquest, French missionaries under the auspices of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (Société des missions étrangères de Paris, MEP) had been operating in the region for two centuries. They ministered to a sizable but persecuted Vietnamese Christian community that numbered 270 thousand in Tonkin and Annam, and another 90 thousand in Cochinchina.[86] In contrast to Algeria, where evangelizing had little purchase and the Catholic Church served Europeans almost exclusively, communitarian Catholic care encompassed many Vietnamese. This was especially true in provinces such as Ninh Binh and Nam Dinh, which were both flood prone and home to many Christians. The French-language press based in large cities likewise bore witness to hunger and encouraged relief. These institutions brought nonadministrative European perspectives to bear on colonial famine. While attention need not logically entail sympathy or relief—in Algeria it did not—the specific confluence of interests and means in Indochina was somewhat more conducive to a caring disposition.

Not unlike conservative Confucians, Catholic missionaries subscribed to supernatural explanations of famine. Seeking natural causes and solutions in delta hydrology, they argued, ignored that famine was at root a punishment of Divine Providence.[87] One priest captured the providential understanding of famine when he preached, with possibly unintentional irony, "On earth as in heaven, one reaps what he sows."[88] The religious understanding of famine as a literal act of God limited care primarily to Christians. Vietnamese Catholics were a community apart. They were tolerated in the earlier years of the nineteenth century thanks to France's support of Nguyen dynasty founder Gia Long in his war for power. Gia Long's successor, Minh Mang, reversed his father's policy of tolerance in the 1830s, clearing the way for the murder of hundreds of thousands of Christians. The 1880s were a period of revived animosity against Catholics, who were commonly seen as collaborators with the French invaders. Developments such as the Save the King Movement, which called for the death of all Christians as well as the expulsion of the French, and the mas-

sacre of forty thousand Catholics in Annam in 1885, help explain the insular communitarianism on the part of missionaries.[89] Along a different axis, acrimony between anticlerical republicanism and the Catholic Church in France sometimes spilled into the colonies, further isolating missions.[90]

The French conquest of Tonkin and Annam in the 1880s contributed to widespread hunger. The MEP missionaries distilled what they saw into evocative images of desolation and suffering to extract pity and alms from French Catholics. Monseigneur Puginier, the head of the MEP mission in Hanoi, described a landscape of war, banditry, floods, and empty granaries. People caught up in the chaos subsisted on grass, roots, and other foods that "do not sustain the stomach."[91] Christians were especially vulnerable to violence.[92] By 1887, fifteen hundred of Puginier's flock had died of "physical or moral suffering."[93]

Moved by real but carefully curated scenes of anguish, the faithful in France donated for their coreligionists overseas.[94] Access to this funding source helped make missions a formidable regional force in Indochina. In 1887, the MEP contracted with a French merchant to import rice from Hong Kong, duty-free thanks to the Indochinese administration's cooperation. The missionaries helped Christians obtain cheap loans from the Bank of Indochina so they could purchase the grain.[95] Even with bank loans and French alms, the MEP's resources fell far short of what was needed for the 180 thousand Christians thought to be in need. But it was enough to make "pagans," according to one missionary, note the care of the ministers of the Lord with admiration and jealousy.[96]

When famine hit again in 1906 and again in 1916, missionaries spoke of an abject misery that was unimaginable without witnessing it firsthand.[97] In the delta province of Ninh Binh, where in 1907 missionaries estimated a mortality of at least three thousand, "one saw on the roads only beggars of cadaverous pallor, all appearing more dead than alive."[98] People tried to survive on rice bran and banana roots. Those who left looking for work found illness instead, returning home only to die. Many took to banditry as an alternative to "wast[ing] away in the tortures of hunger."[99] The starving wandered randomly in search of food, an "appalling army of misery, sowing the way with its dead."[100] Ten years later, this army marched once more, its soldiers cheating hunger with "unnamable scraps" until they expired on the sides of the roads.[101]

The MEP reports were intended not merely to bear witness but to raise money. To this end, stories and storytelling styles were chosen to grab readers' attention with thrilling exoticism, instill pity for suffering Christians, and arouse religious fervor. The practice of parents selling children they could not feed was useful in this regard. It was shocking, provoked sympathy for the children,

and demanded heroic intervention. According to the MEP, one hundred Christian children were sold during the 1906 famine by parents trying to save their lives.[102] The numbers were endowed with emotional power through vivid stories. A missionary related how a "pagan" family, believing their newborn to be possessed by a devil, abandoned her under a bush. She was rescued by a Christian orphanage. Another couple sold their children, bought an extravagant meal, and drowned themselves in a river.[103] Helping the missions repurchase and care for such children was a cause worthy of a generous donation.

As a rule, missionaries prioritized the care of Christians.[104] Even with recourse to French alms, there was hardly enough money to feed the faithful. Some were driven by hunger, "poor counselor," to abandon the Church and try their luck with Buddhist relations. A little rice and some clothes usually returned them to the fold, for "such is the power of alms-giving."[105] Only once Christians were provided for did the MEP expand its charity to others, as when in a packed Nam Dinh churchyard in 1905 it served rice to seven thousand people with no regard to confession.[106] If some Vietnamese stubbornly resisted mission aid despite their desperation, others experienced hunger as revelation. As in the time of Jesus, the poor gravitated toward Christian charity. Limited supplies forced the MEP to reject converts and turn people away from its hospitals. Priests worried that conversions under famine conditions were less than sincere, motivated by material rather than spiritual needs. They fined apostates three centimes for each day they had been Catholic.[107] In the years following famines, though, missionaries complained that "this means of calling souls to us no longer exists" as people reverted to sensuality without a thought for the hereafter.[108]

Even in famine, church and state found it difficult to find common cause. Missionaries sometimes cooperated with the protectorates, but they were often stinging in their criticism of official policy. They accused administrators of actively perpetuating famine through violence, taxes, food exports, and forced labor.[109] The press, many Catholics thought, embodied the virtues of French civilization more fully than the administration did.[110] In reports of people scouring forests for edible roots or throwing themselves on rotting, weevil-infested grain, journalists were unafraid of calling out the administration's "inertia." Contrasting feeble French relief with the famine codes in British India, reporters condemned "ridiculous" rescue efforts that amounted to a mere "mouthful," a "drop in the ocean."[111] They accused the administration of failing to protect subjects from unscrupulous merchants who profited from famine, "first taking everything, and then taking what is left."[112] The MEP-owned newspaper *L'Avenir du Tonkin* scorned administrators as "improvident" and mocked the dearth of useful ideas to "hatch from their administrative

brain."[113] Editor Henri Laumonier, incredulous that families continued to perish of hunger in the age of steam and electricity, was reminded of the great French famines of the Middle Ages. Administrators piled humiliation on top of sorrow, crowding naked men and women together indiscriminately in hospitals. Pointing out that taxes could not be collected from corpses, Laumonier wrote that such negligence made as little sense from an economic standpoint as from a humanitarian one.[114] While the press criticized government policy, it praised private charity from wealthy Asians and the Catholic Church.[115] Inverting the usual hierarchy of civilizations, Annamite philanthropy served as an example for the French.[116]

Journalists, like mandarins, made it harder for French administrators to plead ignorance. Functionaries sometimes learned of famine from the press rather than through official channels. For instance, in early 1906, the resident-superior of Tonkin read reports of starvation in *L'Avenir du Tonkin* and asked subordinates to investigate.[117] The resident of Ha Nam, despite his suspicion of the motives of Catholic journalists, confirmed the presence of extreme misery.[118] Likewise, the resident of Nam Dinh warned against giving too much credence to a hostile press, but, admitting that people were dying, he authorized rice distributions and emergency public works.[119] These officials either did not know or did not care about famine until they read about it in newspapers.

The press, like the missions, raised funds for famine victims. In 1906, *Le Courrier d'Haiphong*, which was owned by Auguste Raphaël Fontaine, a businessman who had made a fortune by securing the official Indochinese alcohol monopoly, opened a charity drive.[120] His newspaper listed the names of donors and published letters of thanks from the administration. Governor-General Paul Beau donated one hundred piastres. In total, around two thousand piastres were collected.[121] *L'Avenir du Tonkin* raised a similar amount.[122] Journalists admitted that these small sums were merely symbolic. They functioned as a public demonstration of care.

Newspapers were outlets for those who despised the starving as well as for the compassionate. Some writers argued that far from being negligent, the administration was overly generous to lazy Annamites taking advantage of public feeling.[123] For others, pity was tempered by disdain and disgust. An article in *Le Courrier d'Haiphong* read, "Without mentioning the strong odors released by the flea-ridden and ill, of sticky but necessary closeness, of the ardor of the sun which seems to ferment all these rags and bad smells," it was not easy to remain in control of one's faculties to distinguish the deserving poor from the frauds. Torn between sympathy and anger for unruly crowds, the author pitied the functionaries who undertook the distasteful task of dealing with the stink of the starving.[124]

Civil society organizations joined the press in pressuring the government. The members of the Haiphong chapter of the Human Rights League, a left-leaning French organization with origins in the Dreyfus affair, were unanimously moved by the plight of the hungry.[125] Following the principle that "the right to life is a primordial right of Humanity," the league asked Governor-General Beau to consider the reestablishment of precolonial granaries and the regulation of rice exports.[126] The governor-general took the request seriously, forwarding the league's suggestions to his subordinates.[127]

The presence or absence of French civil institutions, both religious and laic, was a key variable in how much attention colonial administrations devoted to famine. The mere existence of attention, however, did not by itself ensure better outcomes. In Algeria in 1867, high public awareness of famine was not accompanied by concern for its victims. In Indochina, European attention interacted with Vietnamese imperial bureaucracy and infrastructure in a way that encouraged administrative intervention. But though the French were more concerned about famine victims in Indochina than they had been in Algeria, the incapacity of the colonial state to fund and sustain antifamine policies meant this concern did not necessarily improve the lives of Vietnamese people.

Responsibility and Neglect

As the French authority in Tonkin and Annam matured from a fighting force in the 1880s to discreet manager of the Vietnamese state before the First World War to "rational" modern administration afterward, the burden of care for the hungry shifted in the direction of France. The 1919 suppression of the Confucian examination system that provided the Vietnamese state with classically trained functionaries exemplified the adjustment away from traditional rule.[128] At the same time, the "total war" effort in Europe expanded expectations of what an interventionist state could achieve in the management of societies, broadening administrative imaginations. As French administrators and Vietnamese reformers embraced the promises of modernization, the traditionalist court's usefulness as a source of authority and a ready scapegoat was eroded.

Before World War I, debate about famine was dominated by the themes of dikes, granaries, charity, and liberty of commerce. After the war, there was a marked change in tone as administrators embraced, at least rhetorically, a technocratic, interventionist management style. As the effects of famine lingered in 1917, the governor-general of Indochina, Albert Sarraut, convened a

"commission to study the measures to increase the nutritive value of the indochinese diet." The group was composed of prominent French businessmen and agriculturalists as well as physicians and biologists from Hanoi's Pasteur Institute and the University of Toulouse's medical faculty.[129] The experts concluded that the development of the "Annamite race" required a "normal" diet including the proper amounts of fats, minerals, and "nitrogenous" foods (foods high in protein). Their linking of acute famine to "living conditions" and the quality as well as the quantity of food was an early formulation of an approach Sarraut would champion for the entire French Empire over the next two decades.

Governor-General Sarraut was not alone in favoring long-term development over emergency response. In 1921, the resident-superior of Annam, Pierre Pasquier, decided to eliminate famine in his protectorate. This goal stemmed from twin convictions that protection from famine was a universal raison d'être of all human societies and that Annamites were incapable of the task. Following the standard French liberal narrative, Pasquier identified three principal reasons for the "quasi-disappearance" of dearth in the civilized west: liberty of commerce, improved transportation, and industrialization. He saw no reason why Annam could not follow this template to prosperity. In a circular as notable for its focus on sustained execution as for its unusual detail, he sketched the outlines of a system meant to ensure subsistence for all.[130] It was the most exhaustive famine plan devised in Indochina, and probably the empire, to date.

The standard story of France's defeat of famine in the eighteenth century furnished Pasquier with a model, but it had to be adapted to Annamite circumstances. In medieval Europe and contemporary India, Pasquier observed, the problem of famine presented as periodic cataclysm. In contrast, famine in Annam was endemic. Chronic hunger did not strike the imagination like full-blown famine did, but it was more harmful in its physical and intellectual stunting of the Annamite race. From this angle, the problem of famine was bound up with the problem of pauperism. The Annamite poor were not, Pasquier cautioned, like the European poor, individuals unfortunate in birth, ability, or circumstance. Annamite poverty was a collective problem, the lot of entire communities or regions rather than of isolated individuals or a single social class. An antifamine program was thus necessarily an antipoverty program.

Pasquier dismissed the prevailing expediency of emergency loans as overly reliant on the fallible discretion of administrators. Furthermore, the money for such loans simply did not exist. Instead, he envisioned a rational system that once instituted would function "automatically." This social machinery would be built methodically from the ground up by mapping "famine areas,"

using poverty as a proxy for vulnerability to starvation.[131] The map would be complemented by a detailed history of famines over the previous two decades, indicating whether their causes were "natural," including poor soil, droughts, floods, and epidemics; "exceptional," including typhoons, tidal waves, crop failures, and market failures; or "social," including landlessness, labor shortages, speculation, and lack of credit. The famine areas accounted for variations in ecology and society better than administrative divisions did, allowing for customized diagnoses and solutions. The coastal farmers and fishermen of Tuy Phuoc were vulnerable to floods, while Phan Rang suffered primarily from droughts. In Quang Nam, food shortages were usually due to fluctuations in the cinnamon market, while among the Moi—a Vietnamese term for ethnic minorities meaning "savage" or "barbarian"—they were a seasonal occurrence resulting from the laziness of these "semicivilized" people. A uniform policy was inappropriate for these different microcontexts.[132]

Identifying famine areas would lay the groundwork for a comprehensive antifamine system mobilizing public budgets and mutual aid societies, French and indigenous functionaries, settlers and missionaries, active and retired mandarins, teachers, and notables of all kinds, harmoniously coordinated by Annam's administration. By dividing Annam into sectors corresponding to the famine areas, engineers could tailor hydraulic systems to local needs. This involved restoring precolonial Vietnamese and Cham (an ethnic group from central and southern Indochina) infrastructure that had been left to deteriorate. Other teams of experts would rationalize food distribution by constructing roads and railways. To address economic as well as natural causes, the administration would enlist experts in agronomy and commerce. In fact, every public service would be mobilized in this "crusade against hunger," not only across domains of knowledge but also over time to "definitively engage the future." In other words, it would take a sustained effort of the kind that French colonial administrations were particularly bad at.[133]

As a palliative until Annam was freed from famine, administrators, with the map in front of them, would devise bespoke rescue plans for each famine area, thereby averting starvation before it took hold. Pasquier was not a proponent of emergency work camps. He cited "hecatombs" in Indian famine camps and typhus epidemics in Algerian ones as examples not to imitate. Preferring prevention to alleviation, he advocated public works before famine took hold instead of at its apex. To provide a model, Pasquier came up with a hypothetical rescue plan for an imaginary famine area comprising one entire district (*huyen*) plus two cantons of a neighboring district, favoring social and ecological coherence over administrative demarcations. There would be a supply center in the largest town, as well as two secondary supply centers in logistically appro-

priate villages. The plan included a timeline specifying when in the agricultural cycle administrators should determine if a food shortage was likely, when to request emergency rice, and when to begin distributions.[134] Through economic development and rationalized emergency protocols, famine prevention would no longer depend on fallible human judgment and fickle generosity; it would be entrusted to a machine-like automatic system.

In the following decades, French thinkers would question the conception of famine as something that happened to places rather than to people. In reality, Annam was not conveniently composed of discrete famine areas inhabited by undifferentiated masses uniformly prone to starvation. Yet, without the sociological or biochemical knowledge of later reformers, Pasquier was among the first administrators to insist on comprehensive development attuned to local needs rather than reactive improvisation. His emphasis on continuity and follow-through proved prescient. The plan was never implemented. The map of poverty and famine in Annam attests to its unfulfilled ambition (figures 2–5).

As the resident-general of Annam, Pierre Pasquier modeled creative, if flawed, thinking about famine. As governor-general of Indochina from 1928 to 1934, he succumbed to the inertia that wed the administration to staid practices. By this time, the mandarinate had been largely discredited in the eyes of many Vietnamese. The year 1925 was a symbolically salient one. The death of reformer Phan Chu Trinh and the house arrest of the more aggressively anticolonial Phan Boi Chau, two towering Vietnamese leaders, ushered in a period of heightened antagonism toward both French and traditional authority. It was also the year that Nguyen Ai Quoc, the future Ho Chi Minh, formed the Revolutionary Youth League in China, a precursor to the Indochinese Communist Party. After the mid-1920s, anti-French feeling increasingly went hand in hand with disdain for traditional Vietnamese leaders and values.[135] Still, France continued to rely on a traditional authority that had been deteriorating for some time. New fault lines solidified as the French propped up the power of mandarins against modernizing and sometimes anticolonial reformers.

In 1929, typhoons and floods led to widespread dearth. Governor-General Pasquier responded with an antifamine proposal that looked quite different from the one he crafted for Annam earlier in the decade. This was not because he was ignorant of alternatives, but because he was constrained by the exigencies of his new position. He framed the new project not as modernization but as an extension of timeless Annamite "foresight and charitable aid."[136] His aim was no longer to eradicate famine through rational management but to fill the gaps in traditional Vietnamese social assistance.[137] Tellingly, Pasquier first sought to determine who was already cared for, "in right and in fact," by Vietnamese social arrangements and could therefore be left out of his administration's

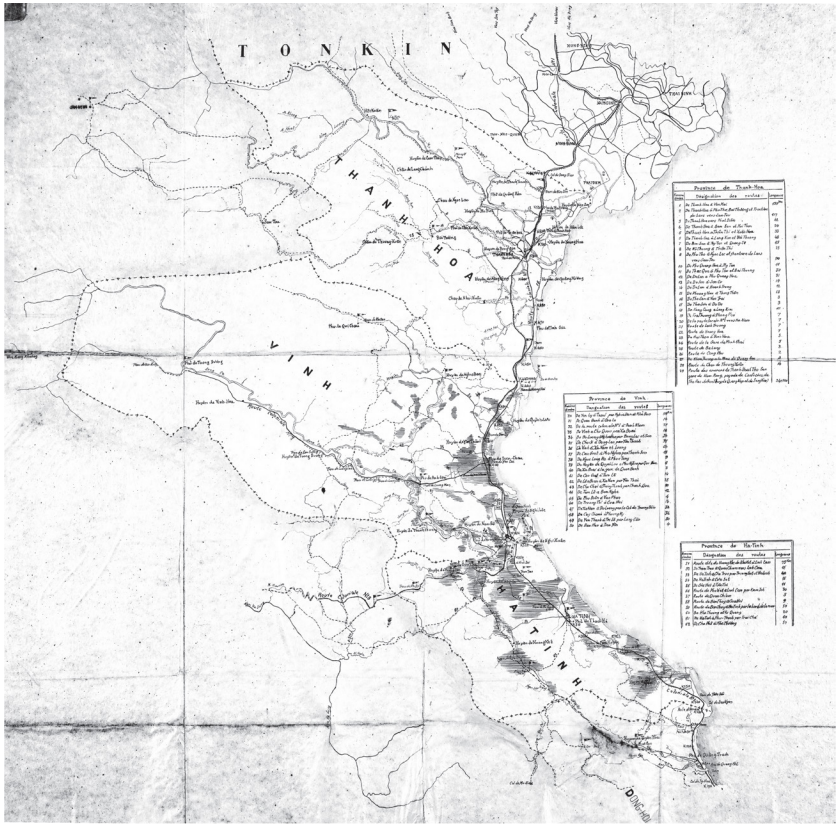

Figure 2. Map of poverty and famine in Annam, 1921. ANOM, GGI 46395.

field of action. Whenever possible, the French preferred to "remind" the Vietnamese of their ancestral duties toward the marginalized.[138]

To determine just what these ancestral duties were, Pasquier canvassed mandarins. Most, perhaps sensitive about their fading authority, favored a policy based on precolonial Nguyen laws and promotions in exchange for charity. Article 85 of the Gia Long code provided for the care of disaster victims, including the requirement that villages pay for the repatriation of residents. An edict from the eighth year of Minh Mang's reign (1828) required each province to fund a refuge for widows and widowers, orphans, the infirm, and others with no means of support. Each was to receive a small stipend and a half bowl of rice daily. An ordinance from the eighteenth year of Tu Duc's reign (1865) specified who was eligible for grain distributions. Victims of fire, for example, were not.[139] The French looked to community custom as well as

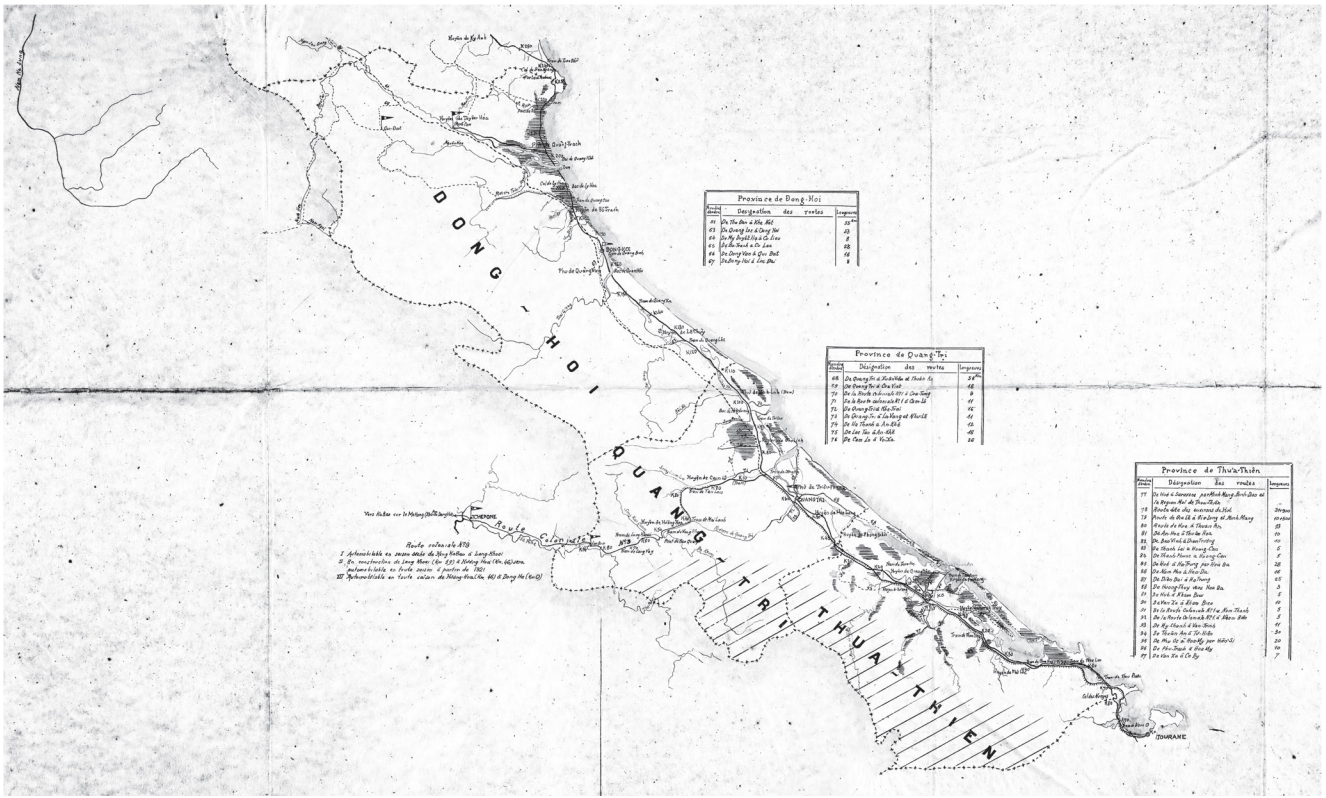

Figure 3. Map of poverty and famine in Annam, 1921. ANOM, GGI 46395.

Figure 4. Map of poverty and famine in Annam, 1921. ANOM, GGI 46395.

to codified law to disentangle which duties fell to the family, which to the village, and which, in the last resort, to the state.[140] After weeks of debating Vietnamese and French proposals, Pasquier ignored them and ordered the creation of a cash fund to be used at the discretion of individual administrators.[141] In the end, he resorted to the ad hoc emergency measures he had previously dismissed as ineffective. There is no evidence the fund existed during the shortages of the 1930s.

Confucians, Catholics, Journalists, and Engineers

In Indochina as in Africa, the French saw colonial famines as the unavoidable consequences of improvident races and difficult natural environments. Administrators intervened only with the utmost reluctance, in a reactive rather than systematic fashion. The forms of care available to fill the space left vacant by the French varied by colony. In Tonkin and Annam, the maintenance of the

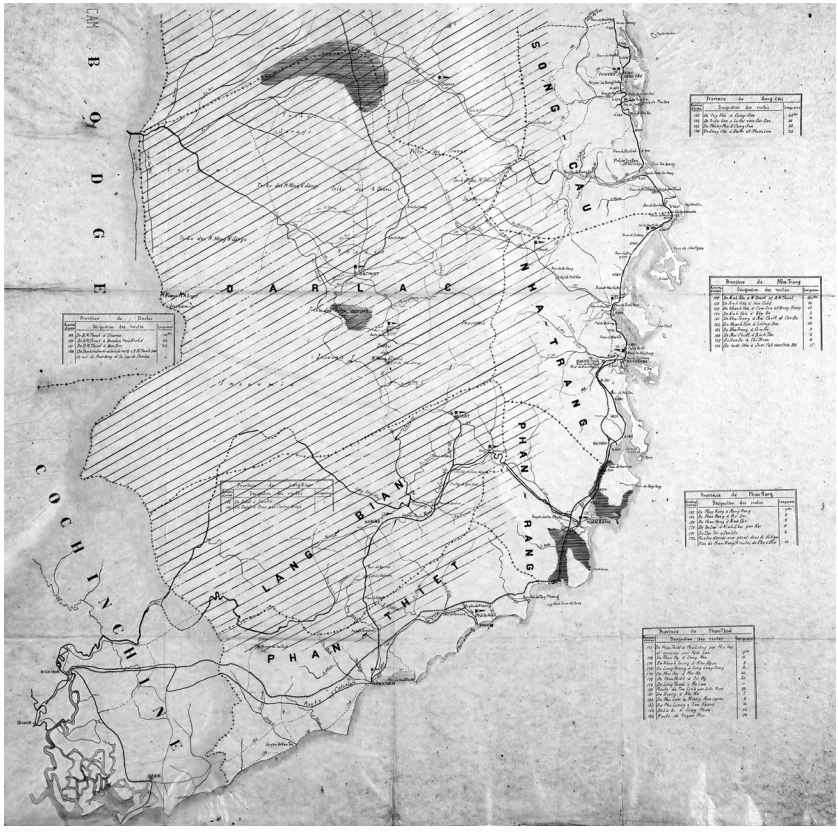

Figure 5. Map of poverty and famine in Annam, 1921. ANOM, GGI 46395.

centralized Vietnamese state with its Confucian responsibility for social provision meant that the French had to deal with a preexisting expectation of government involvement. The fact that flooding was a major natural trigger of famines in the lowlands of Tonkin and Annam, as opposed to drought and vermin in Africa, gave French and Vietnamese civil engineers an obvious technical means to combat hunger. Finally, a strong Vietnamese Catholic community meant that Christian care encompassed many Vietnamese within its circle of concern. These specificities of the Indochinese colonial situation conditioned the standard debates about individual foresight, free markets, liberal charity, and republican responsibility that were present wherever the French went.

French and Vietnamese administrators in Indochina paid attention to famine in a more sympathetic way than in other parts of the empire. Yet they still failed to prevent tens of thousands of starvation deaths. Commissions were formed and solutions debated, but they were soon forgotten as the starving

faded from sight. Comprehensive social and infrastructural reform was repeatedly called for but not undertaken. Plans for rescue protocols, granaries, and cash funds were repeatedly proposed, but they were never available when the next disaster struck. Each time a famine occurred, the same debates were reprised as though for the first time. The French tendency to withdraw from responsibility was not unique to Southeast Asia; it was an ideological and structural feature of colonial rule. Even as Confucians, Catholics, journalists, and engineers debated and competed over hunger in Indochina, underprepared and overwhelmed administrators in the African Sahel were stupefied by a catastrophic famine in 1913.