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## CHAPTER 1

# Human Trade in Colonial Vietnam

*Nicolas LAINEZ*

Our topic in this study, trafficking in persons, is being done in large scale. Pirates disembarked spontaneously, attacked villages and withdrew ... taking young men and women as prisoners to sell them at the markets of the Celestial Empire. In land, they had correspondents [that] attracted Annamese girls in lovers' appointments, took their service as maids or bought children from parents. (Paulus 1885: 45)

If one looks at the archives, it is clear that history can be a useful tool in the understanding of the modern phenomena of human trafficking. These practices, widespread over the Indochinese peninsula a century ago, and so aptly described by colonial administrators, have not disappeared from contemporary Asia according to observers, researchers, and anti-trafficking campaigners. In fact, today's practices resemble what was taking place a hundred years ago to such a great extent that the arguments of those aid organizations who claim this problem is anchored in recent processes of globalization must be challenged. Instead, the similarities and parallels between the colonial period and the present one are striking, emphasizing durability as well as change.

The objective of this chapter is to map this institution of trading human beings at the intersection of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, providing a specific Vietnamese example of the more general need to consider historical precursors to contemporary migration patterns. The chapter will begin by describing the major national and transnational trafficking routes, pointing out the details of crossing points and dispersal markets. As will be shown, those trafficked were Vietnamese, but also Cantonese, Japanese, and European. Then, the nature of this human trade will be assessed by focusing on its different resulting social forms, particularly adoption, concubinage, and prostitution. Finally, French policies to suppress piracy in Tonkin<sup>1</sup> and to manage prostitution – considered as a “necessary evil” – will be outlined.

The period covered by this chapter ranges from 1863, when an anonymous author published *Note sur l'Esclavage*, to 1941, date of the publication of Andre Baudrit's book *La Femme et l'Enfant dans l'Indochine Française et dans la Chine*

*du Sud (Rapt-Vente-Infanticide)*. Secondary sources comprise published historical papers and books as well as reports from French colonial administrators. Primary sources include reports of proceedings and administrative letters from French Consuls in China from the National Archives Center No. 1 in Hà Nội. Given that the sources are disparate in nature and quality, the images drawn are necessarily partial. The goal is not to offer a definitive picture of the situation, but to explore a research perspective on human trafficking that emphasizes historical similarities and parallels. One should keep in mind that all these sources bear the stamp of colonialism (Delaye 2005), whether in justifying the system or in the interventionist intentions of narrators who hoped their testimony could relieve human injustice and “heal a wound that the flag could not cover up” (Paulus 1885: 49). One should also bear in mind that, just as in the prolific contemporary literature on trafficking from the media, aid organizations, and national agencies, the voices of those actually trafficked are usually absent. The women and children tricked, kidnapped, sold, exploited, or thrown into the Gulf of Tonkin rarely leave their own testimony. Some, then as now, disappear into the red light districts of urban centers while others succeed in finding a relatively stable new life or returning home to their villages.

## Mechanisms and Routes

Numerous complaints and newspaper accounts from the colonial period tell of child abductions in the Red River delta. Children of indigent Vietnamese or Chinese families continuously disappeared without leaving a trace. Kidnappers used a wide range of techniques to abduct their prey: enticing promises for work or marriage, candies to lure young children, chloroform to put victims to sleep, brutal raids and kidnappings, bandit attacks on coastal villages. Once deceived, victims were usually moved from one intermediary place to another before being sold in border towns or northern ports like Hải Phòng. On 2 January 1936, the newspaper *Annam Nouveau* offered figures on reported disappearances: 172 in 1933, 134 in 1934, and 236 in 1935, yielding an average of 180 missing children per year. The French colonial justice system was at first inadequately equipped to deal with these offenses, although over the years it adopted a more active approach (as shall be discussed).

We lack reliable data about the prices paid for these individuals as well as stable reference points to set up comparative tables of the currencies, whether Chinese silver tael, French Indochinese Union piaster, French francs, Hong Kong dollars, or thirty gram “ounces” of gold. The price of each person was calculated according to criteria of ethnic origin, gender, age, health and physical condition, and educational level. For women, virginity was an added criterion of value. Factors related to market supply and demand also affected price. In general, women were

more expensive than men because they were perceived as being more malleable and entrepreneurial as workers and because they could also become spouses or concubines. Those who were sold were often later exchanged for money, rice, salt, cattle, weapons and ammunition, opium, or for other individuals. In 1883, Taboulet (1883: 117) indicated prices in piasters as follows: a child of ten to twelve cost fifteen to eighteen piasters, at fifteen a boy's value climbed to twenty piasters and a girl's could climb to thirty or forty piasters if pretty. The markup in price was considerable. In 1906, for example, the price of a Vietnamese child bought for one piaster in Vietnam could reach one or two hundred Hong Kong dollars. In 1941, Baudrit (1941: 118) states that the price of a *Tonkinois* child was between six and fifteen dollars when first purchased, but the value could reach thirty to one hundred Hong Kong dollars on the island market. These figures indicate the substantial profits that were generated by the trade in humans at that time.

Generally, agents who abducted the women and children were not those who exploited them. Victims were commonly sold and resold through a chain of intermediaries that generated profit in each transaction. In Tonkin, the identification of potential victims was usually accomplished by local women traders who had little difficulty in identifying prey for themselves or in assisting other captors. These women, who acted as brokers, often bought children for small amounts of money and then raised them in their houses. The children destined to be sent to China, for example, were dressed with Chinese-style clothing, their hair arranged with Chinese-style braids, and their teeth were whitened if they had been previously lacquered in black. While being raised, children were prepared for the fate that awaited them. For the majority, that was domestic service, prostitution, or marriage-like unions. Generally they stayed with the brokers for a period of between six months and two years. After that, children were sent to Chinatowns in Hà Nội or Sài Gòn, or to southern China. The youngest recruits were prized by Chinese residents or Cantonese traders traveling in Indochina. Some young women might also marry French administrators. It was possible for those who benefited from the company of these women during their sojourns in Indochina to do so without knowing their companion's true origin.

In the late nineteenth century, human trafficking in northern Vietnam seems to have been in the hands of Vietnamese and Chinese bandits. Some of these worked with German or British merchants by subcontracting the shipment of the merchandise. In the South China Sea, complex alliances developed among organized criminal groups, fortune pirates, and shipping traders, all under the eyes of powerless French authorities.

The actual routes of human trafficking were multiple. *Tonkinois* recruits were transferred to China by both sea and land. By sea, women from the Red River delta were routed to Hải Phòng either by land or by small rivers that pour out into the gulf. From there they were shipped to Pakhoi in Guangxi province.

Sometimes they were hidden in bunkers or “ostensibly taken by parents of alleged Chinese which for the occasion had changed the national costume for a disguise that gave them the appearance of Chinese girls” or “with legal passports issued by the Residences where it was clearly mentioned *with their own children*.”<sup>2</sup> From Pakhoi, they were sent to the port of Haikou in the island province of Hainan (formerly Hoi Hao) and then transferred to Macao or Hong Kong. Arrests were frequent in Hải Phòng after the promulgation of a decree in December 1912 that strengthened controls on suspicious vessels. As a consequence, smugglers started to use more discreet sampans, carrying small numbers of persons to circumvent Hạ Long Bay, Cát Bà, or Ke Bao islands.<sup>3</sup> By day, children were hidden in caves, and by night they traveled on junks or were hidden in steamship holds. Given these circumstances, trips to China could last for several days; many died of hunger, exhaustion, or drowning after being thrown into the sea by the sailors. The Franco-Vietnamese press nicknamed pirates from the Gulf of Tonkin the “dogs of the sea” (*chiens de la mer*) because they never hesitated to throw victims, tied up, into the water when French sea police patrols approached.<sup>4</sup>

By land, convoys took isolated trails to cross the mountainous provinces of Đông Triều, Bắc Giang, and Lạng Sơn towards Guangxi. If departing from Hà Nội, convoys moved towards Tuyên Quang, then crossed the Lào Cai Chinese border with Yunnan to reach Mong Tseu. Most of the women traveling by land supplied the demand for marriages and adoptions in Guangxi province.

### Trading Women for What Purposes?

Why did Chinese need to import Vietnamese women? Did China lack for females? Hải Dương Resident Massimy asserted various reasons (Baudrit 1941: 90). First, Chinese women caught on the spot knew the region and could easily escape, whereas Vietnamese women sent far from their homeland could not. Second, men preferred not to buy Chinese compatriots because they felt more sympathy for them than for their Vietnamese counterparts. Third, Chinese employers enjoyed greater freedom with Vietnamese employees than with Chinese. Fourth, Vietnamese women were easier and cheaper to acquire than Chinese women.

Although most of these arguments seem plausible, one is highly questionable. The fact that Vietnamese women were cheaper than Chinese, more easily subjected to all kinds of tasks, and less tempted to escape, all seems reasonable. But to argue that Chinese did not want to buy fellow Chinese due to sympathy or compassion seems to contradict the *mui tsai* system (literally “little sister” or “small servant” in Cantonese dialect) that developed in southern China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This system was grounded in poverty and only worsened during periods of famine, epidemics and natural disasters, and after the two opium wars. The *mui tsai* system actually generated the first in-

ternational campaign against what was labeled “child slavery” (Haslewood 1930). It is believed that hundreds of thousands of the young and destitute from southern China provinces were sold as wives, concubines, or prostitutes at that time. The youngest (the *mui tsai*) were sent to work as domestic employees for wealthy owners in Canton, Hong Kong, Malaysia, or Singapore. Transactions were usually subject to written contracts. A *mui tsai* could become either a servant or a concubine, and the purchaser had the right to re-sell her, marry her, or make her his concubine. The servant had to perform domestic chores and she usually received little or no financial reward (Chin 2002, Haslewood 1930, Jaschok 1988, Warren 1993).

Buying servants, wives, or concubines must be distinguished from prostitution. Silvestre’s (1880) report about slavery and forms of servitude in Cochinchina, Landes’s (1880) letter about prostitution in Chợ Lớn, and Hardy’s article (1994) about military brothels or BMC (*Bordel Militaire de Campagne*) all portrayed a complex situation: Chinese brothels employing Cantonese children, Japanese and European prostitutes serving French troops, and trafficking of Chinese and Vietnamese women to Singapore. In 1880, Chợ Lớn Mayor Landes described the traffic of young girls being employed as maids or prostitutes in the Chinese municipality.<sup>5</sup> Like northern female brokers, Chợ Lớn Madams raised their recruits, mostly young Cantonese or Hongkongese girls, to become second spouses or prostitutes. The status of concubine was a godsend for Chinese human traders who disguised their victims as concubines. Vietnamese girls were dressed in Chinese clothing and received Chinese education to gradually obliterate their Vietnamese identity. Girls covered the cost of their instruction and their living expenses by working as domestic workers or singers. Madams subjected their employees to debts and tracked them if they ran away. The best alternative for a young woman to escape was to marry a wealthy Chinese. Prices depended on the candidate’s age, beauty, qualities, and size of debt. Some of these women remained in brothels as boarders when, for example, a husband already had several concubines and did not want to bring an additional one into the home or when a merchant only wanted to visit the concubine occasionally when he stopped in town. If no client had expressed the desire to marry these women by the age of fifteen or sixteen, or if the price requested by the Madam was too high, they became prostitutes. When they became old, prostitutes were enlisted as domestic workers or hairdressers and could officially retire. Chợ Lớn, for example, counted sixty-five “official” retired prostitutes in 1880.

The Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn area was a hub through which trafficked women passed and in which they worked. In addition to Vietnamese women, other prostitutes came from Southern China, Japan, or Europe. In 1880, Landes (1880) counted eleven brothels in Chợ Lớn employing 45 women and 66 girls aged from five to fourteen. In 1908 there were 216 women, a quarter of whom were under the age of fifteen. In the early 1910s, records indicate between 300 and 380 prosti-

tutes, plus 450 declared as prostitutes but fugitive. Figures stagnated during the 1920s, but grew considerably in the early 1930s to reach 650 declared and 450 declared but fugitive. Nevertheless, these official prostitutes (meaning those who had regular medical examinations) only accounted for a fraction of all prostitutes according to French doctors. In fact most women were illegal or unreported to the Mores Brigade (*Brigade des mœurs*). Medical authorities from the 1930s believed that five thousand prostitutes were working in Hà Nội, two thousand in Hải Phòng, and “thousands” in Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn.

Vietnamese and Chinese prostitutes worked side by side with Japanese and European women. There were the Japanese *Karayuki-san*, “women who go far away” or “women sent to China” (Roustan 2005, Warren 1993). The *Karayuki-san* implantation in Indochina began in the early 1880s and had ended by the early 1920s. The majority of them were destitute prostitutes (or pimps) whose remittances represented an important source of revenue for the Japanese government. Japanese women offered their sexual services in Southeast Asian cities like Sài Gòn, Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, or even further afield in Siberia and Australia. French clients considered Japanese women as the most exotic and also the safest in terms of venereal diseases, especially compared to Vietnamese women. Japanese brothels were located in Vietnamese-style houses and had no distinctive marks at the front gate. The business was conducted discreetly and neither the facades nor the employees appealed directly to neighborhood clients. Yet *Karayuki-san* themselves were easily identifiable thanks to their exclusive dress: *kimono*, *obi* (wide cloth belt), *geta* (elevated wooden clogs), and bun in their hair. This dress suggested the status of luxury prostitute and ensured visual differentiation from local Vietnamese or Chinese competitors (Roustan 2005). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Japanese international prestige was affirmed by war victories against the Chinese in 1894 and the Russians in 1904. Following these wars and commercial successes in Malaysia that enriched the Japanese economy, Japan started to repatriate *karayuki-san* in the early 1920s. With the need for remittances reduced and an increased feeling of shame towards these women “having being sent far away,” the need to repatriate them was considered urgent.

Finally, a few European prostitutes also operated in Vietnam. They were brought by merchants transiting through Singapore or Hong Kong. These Europeans worked in Westernized cities in the hands of criminal networks specializing in foreign demand. The clientele included French military officers, civil servants, and rich merchants. European prostitutes worked discreetly in private houses which were not advertised as brothels. The *Valaque* women from Eastern Europe were a special category and suffered from stigmatization. French authorities expelled them from Indochina between 1915 and 1920 claiming that they were causing a deterioration in public morality. *Valaque* prostitutes were subjected to special legislation and suffered from segregation policies or spatial confinement.

## French Policy against the “Yellow Trade”

The “yellow trade” was an offense that had to be suppressed in the eyes of the French colonial administration. Yet prosecutions of kidnappers were rare. Silvestre (1880: 140) gives us some figures on convictions: three in 1874, one in 1875, one in 1876, one in 1877, three in 1878, and fifteen in 1879. The trade posed numerous problems not only for the victims but also for the colonial administration. First, France observed the development of complex criminal alliances between secret societies and bandits engaged in illicit activities in the Gulf of Tonkin and, despite its indisputable noble intentions, felt unable to protect colonial subjects. This undermined its credibility. Second, the traffic created diplomatic troubles with China and European countries operating in Chinese ports, especially Germany and Britain, which did not agree with the spontaneous controls on their ships. Third, the trade caused tensions to develop between the Government of Indochina, reliant on the Ministry of the Colonies, and the French consuls in China, reliant on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tensions crystallized in the case of rescues and repatriations. Vietnamese “victims” who were arrested by Chinese police were usually taken to French consular delegations in charge of organizing their repatriation. The cooperation between these consular authorities and colonial administrators inevitably caused problems. As a consequence, victims were cloistered amidst jurisdictional battles: who was to organize their repatriation, who was to fund it, and what was to be done with the women once they were back in Vietnam? (Lessard 2009).

What actions, then, did the French undertake to combat the trade in humans? First of all, prosecutions and penalties against convicted criminals rose at the beginning of the twentieth century, although they remained discreet in the pages of local newspapers. Moreover, authorities extended their vigilance at the Sino-Vietnamese border, which included strengthening controls over the delivery of travel permits to China. An agreement signed in 1895 allowed the establishment of a joint Sino-Vietnamese police force to suppress criminal activities at the frontier. Maritime shipping was also targeted and vigilance was increased over junks and vessels heading to China from Hải Phòng. These repressive policies had a few successes: dismantling criminal networks, arrests of bandits, repatriation of Vietnamese victims from China, and reinforcement of land and sea controls. However, and despite numerous efforts, the results of this campaign were limited. Indeed, the authorities even observed an increase in the tradé.

Repatriations posed a number of problems. On the one hand, repatriations raised ethical questions: What should be done with women who welcomed their own migration to China and did not want to return to Vietnam? What was to be done with those who felt happy with their marriage? And what about those who had nobody awaiting them in Vietnam or had nowhere to go? “Will we again break these unions, irregular at the initial stage, but already sanctioned by time

and mutual consent?” asked the Resident of Bắc Kạn in 1904.<sup>6</sup> If the law had to be applied with severity, newly formed families would risk separation.

On the other hand, if women were handed over without proper follow-up, were they not at risk of resale? Here is a frightening notice found on the public walls of Quang Tcheou Wan, Canton province, on July 1918:

Tchan the battalion leader [...] informs the public that 252 young women abducted and not yet repurchased are remaining. Those who wish to redeem their wives and daughters must go straight to the Hop Ky house, Lord's of Pan Pou Kuong, to convey a price, and after having paid a suitable amount, the redemption will take place. There will be no more formalities [...] No one must disobey this order. (Bonnafont 1924: 776 as cited by Baudrit 1941: 117)<sup>7</sup>

One of the probable reasons why piracy and human trafficking escalated was the increased development of infrastructures that allowed commercial and human exchanges: land roads and fluvial streams were improved, regional markets and complex commercial circuits were developed. Needless to say, the Vietnamese peasantry was impoverished under the French, thus providing a fertile ground for indebtedness and all kinds of exploitation. In addition, the perception of trafficking by colonial administrators and French Consuls in China diverged. The former never approved the trade and were constantly frustrated by their inability to put an end to it in Vietnam. Yet, Consuls were confronted by Vietnamese victims whose stories horrified them. They were also exhausted by the colonial administrative bureaucracy, and the frequent attitude of indifference when repatriations had to be organized. Caution is therefore necessary when analyzing colonial policies emanating from different institutional bodies since the “French administration” did not form a homogenous group (Lessard 2009).

Beyond the specific issue of human trafficking, how did the French perceive prostitution and how did they regulate it? Not only was trafficking in women for prostitution a grave offense, but prostitutes also represented a “venereal danger” as they were prime suspects for conveying sexually transmitted diseases. During the French occupation, prostitution was considered a “necessary evil” that was essential to comfort the morale of the troops (Guénel 2001, Tracol 2009, 2010). The colonial administration encouraged prostitution for soldiers in specific and controlled areas. Early on, French observers were bothered by the apparent lack of administrative supervision on prostitution by Vietnamese authorities, and this policy changed dramatically under French rule. But problems remained. A majority of French military and civilian personnel resided in the municipalities of Sài Gòn and Hà Nội. At the end of the nineteenth century, the ratio of French immigrants was one woman for seven men. The installation of troops in urban centers generated a particularly concentrated demand for sexual services. There was a need both to make women available and to control them. The fight against

so-called illegal prostitution – beyond medical control or taxation – was directed largely toward public health. As early as 1880, the French administration set up regulatory policies. Some prostitutes working in brothels were registered, subjected to taxation, and obliged to follow regular medical check ups, whereas other prostitutes – the majority – worked unregistered and discreetly. Those women were anonymous and illegal, and were therefore uncontrollable. They became an obsession for the French who sought to regularize them by implementing regulations. From 1880 onwards, an impressive list of decrees and laws prohibiting soliciting or clandestine prostitution emerged. These laws and decrees sought to control the delivery of permits to open new brothels, to apply discriminatory licenses (in 1912, opening a Vietnamese house cost 30 piasters whereas to open a Chinese or a Japanese house cost 150), to enforce segregationist policies that forbade mixing women from different origins in the same establishment, and to impose heavy taxation that could be reinvested in health centers.

One crucial part of managing prostitution was the “Mores Brigade” that was created in municipalities as early as 1880 to register prostitutes, monitor establishments, and suppress the activities of illegal prostitutes. Registered women received a card indicating their age, workplace, and the results of their weekly medical tests. Cards also described the shape of their face, nose, mouth, and chin. The main demand of the army was to establish brothels hosting “healthy” women. This would lead to “reserved quarters” (*quartiers réservés*) for the prostitutes. Yet medical centers for prostitutes were limited in number and in resources and could not provide the necessary services. Vietnamese brothels were perceived as dirty and employing “old” and “unhealthy” women. In general, Vietnamese prostitutes were perceived as having a higher risk of passing sexual diseases to clients compared to Japanese, Chinese, or European prostitutes.

### Connecting the Past and the Present

The “yellow trade” emerged as an issue of significance in colonial Vietnam from the end of the nineteenth to the first half of the twentieth century. Countless sources provide evidence of this: deception and abduction complaints, cases brought to court, miscellaneous articles in the Vietnamese press, discoveries of “human convoys” crossing the Sino-Vietnamese border or heading towards China across the Gulf of Tonkin. Whether recruited voluntarily or by force, impoverished women were transported from the countryside to the major Indochinese cities that had a strong French presence (Hà Nội, Sài Gòn, Chợ Lớn and Hải Phòng), and further to Hong Kong and the Chinese provinces of Guangxi, Yunnan, and Guangdong. They were transported through a variety of networks and for a variety of reasons, mostly to become prostitutes, servants, spouses and mistresses. Movement occurred in two directions. On the one hand, Vietnam-

ese were sent to the urban centers or to southern China; on the other, Chinese, Japanese, and European women were imported through different networks to fill the prostitution and marriage or mistress market in Vietnam for international merchants and French administrators and soldiers.

Contemporary studies about human trafficking and labor in Asia, as well as mobility for the purpose of prostitution and forms of domestic servitude, would be enriched if historical material were more often taken into consideration.

Firstly, the historical approach enables scholars to map the domestic and transnational flows of mobility for the purposes mentioned above. As in the colonial period, contemporary migrants are now transported through the same places as their predecessors, such as the land borders of Vietnam and China (Grillot 2009 and her chapter in this collection) and Cambodia (Lainez 2011a), and further to Singapore as attested by recent research (Lainez 2011b) and media reports (VNS 2008). As in the past, the majority of women now come from rural, impoverished and often indebted households in the densely populated Mekong and Red River deltas. It is undeniable that Vietnamese transnational trade and family networks continue to play a critical role in the structuring of cross-border mobility. Still largely unknown, these Vietnamese networks, often intertwined with Chinese and Cambodian networks (for Vietnam's neighboring countries), deserve more research from a sociological perspective. Grillot (2009, and her chapter in this collection) shows how Vietnamese women are easily convinced by traders and brokers from the Vietnam-China border to enter into the marriage and prostitution industry in China. As in the colonial period, Vietnamese women are imported not only to marry and to reproduce, but also to work in the petty-trade and prostitution sectors. More research is needed to evaluate the nature of these networks across the borders and their involvement in facilitating cross-border mobility. Sources from both the colonial period and the present could be combined to explore the morphology of these networks that continue to structure cross-border mobility.

Secondly, as this chapter suggests, human trafficking seems to have occurred in the past in ways that are very similar to the present: the sale of human beings, the use of deception, and the kidnapping of women and children. Media reports and complaints from the Indochinese period often mentioned the sale of young children, especially young women for adoption, domestic work and prostitution purposes. The extreme poverty of the peasantry has long been a justification for this type of sale. Colonial ethnography (Savinien 1899, Anonymous 1863, Dartiguenave 1908) and literature address this particular kind of human transaction that prevails in present-day Vietnam. The famous novel *When the Light is Out* (*Tất Đền*) by Ngô Tất Tố published in 1939 illustrates this practice remarkably well. It is a major work addressing the sale of humans in Vietnamese rural society in detail. The story takes place in an imaginary province of Tonkin in the 1930s. It describes the harsh reality of a peasant woman who is reduced to extreme poverty

and is eventually forced to sell her eldest daughter, aged seven, for two piastres to a moneylender of the village who is both rich and arrogant. Her motive is simple: to pay the tax and liberate her husband who has been imprisoned after having been beaten by tax collectors. Through a gradual descent into hell, minutely described by the writer, the mechanisms that turn the unacceptable into the acceptable are exposed. These sales of young children continue in Vietnam, and the issue is regularly reported in the local and international press (Asia Pacific News 2009, BBC News 2009, Hoang Tuan and Tiên Tho 2009). The findings of my fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2009 in Châu Đốc, a Vietnamese district on the border between An Giang and Takeo provinces, show that mothers who were raped, abandoned by their partner, or incapable of raising their child for lack of financial means, placed their children in the illegal adoption market. Brokers, generally women paid by commission, travel from Hồ Chí Minh City to Châu Đốc to take these children away from their mothers. These brokers visit the young mothers at home or go to the town square to obtain information from indigents, beggars, and street prostitutes about possible "suppliers." The children are sold for sums ranging from US \$250 to US \$600 and are then placed with urban families who are unable to have children. As described by Ngô Tất Tố in the late 1930s, this form of transaction becomes acceptable from a moral standpoint because of its context: a poor and desperate mother is driven into selling her child so that she can support herself and her other children. In other words, destitution and despair excuse the socially condemned act of selling one's children.

Thirdly, the family depicted in the novel *When the Light is Out* is representative of Southeast Asian families that have long been afflicted by high levels of indebtedness, cash scarcity and lack of savings, high interest rates, and widespread debt-bondage. In colonial Vietnam, the situation was exacerbated by the land and taxation policies implemented by the French government which made farmers even poorer. Pierre Gourou (1940: 277, cited by Ngo Vinh Long 1991: 84) stated that hardly any Cochinchinese farmer began the rice season without getting into debt. In addition, farmers constantly borrowed to survive and to cover costly birth, marriage, and death ceremonies (Buu Loc 1941: 9–19). For moneylenders, high interest loans were an easy, reliable and profitable way to generate wealth with a relatively small capital investment. It was often the case that borrowers were unable to repay their loans; the lenders would then seize the land as repayment of the interest and/or principal. For the majority of peasants who had nothing to mortgage, the loans were generally short-term. But a small debt did not mean a low interest rate; quite the opposite, as the small loans were the ones which brought the lenders the most, up to 3650 percent per year for the *vay bạc ngày* (daily loans) or *vay cắt cổ* (cut-throat loans) types (Gourou 1940: 277, cited by Ngo Vinh Long 1991: 85). These loans were typically repaid in cash or in kind. The moneylenders were mainly Vietnamese, but Chinese and Chetty Indians from Tamil Nadu (South India) were also in the money-lending

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business. Informal credit had a corrosive effect on Vietnamese peasant society. After having mortgaged their few available assets such as land and crops, insolvent farmers had no choice but to use their labor, or that of their wife and children, as collateral. Indeed, according to available sources, renting out one's services, or that of one's spouse or children, to repay a loan was tolerated and regulated by law at the beginning of the Lê dynasty (1428–1788) until the end of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) (Briffaut 1907, Dang Trinh Ky 1933, Buu Loc 1941). Once in debt, it was almost impossible for the farmers to escape from the vicious circle; as a consequence, they ended up borrowing again to repay interest.

Although the historical and economic context has changed dramatically, a similar pattern of household indebtedness and the persistence of a highly developed informal credit sector have been observed in present-day Vietnam, particularly in the Mekong delta where I have conducted field research. This sector strangles the debtor, as in the expression that Pierre Gourou noted back in the 1940s: *cho vay tiền cắt cổ*, which stands for “cut-throat loans.” Moneylenders charge a rate of interest ranging from 20 to 150 percent a month. The amount and conditions of the loan differ according to the needs and the solvency of the debtor, the willingness of the moneylender, and the role of a broker when one is used. Poor provincial households that refrain from agricultural activity must borrow to subsist, to cover unexpected expenses, or to make expensive purchases. Understanding the economic and social bond between the debtor and the creditor is critical for an understanding of the whole socioeconomic system and its social implications, for instance why poor and heavily indebted parents resort to forcing their children into child labor or commercial sex in order to repay loans. Colonial and contemporary studies of slavery and debt-bondage are immensely useful in forming a general understanding of socioeconomic systems that seem to have transcended time.

## Notes

1. Tonkin is the northernmost region of Vietnam, south of the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi and to the east of Laos. France assumed sovereignty over Tonkin and Annam after the Franco-Chinese war (1881–1885), using the name of the capital in Vietnamese for the whole region.
2. For the two citations: Hà Nội, National Archives Center Number 1. File n. 76594, letter sent by the Resident Superior of Tonkin to the provincial Residents on 22 April 1891.
3. The Resident of Quang Yen describes these facts in a letter addressed to the Resident Superior of Tonkin: “Recently an Annamese woman presented herself in Port Wallut and declared that a Chinese, named Sa Van, delivered her and her two children to a Chinese junk. Six women, two girls and four Annamese children were on board, but she did not say anything else. The junk sailed at night, during the day; the boss

obliged them to disembark and hid them behind rocks. On the second day after departure, the junk was near the island of Vạn Vực when discovered by a postal service ship in Gow Tow Island that tried to seize it.” Hà Nội, National Archives Center Number 1. File 76594, letter n. 19, 6 January 1912.

4. On 8 November 1909, the Assistant Director of the Customs Department in Hải Phòng informed the Resident Superior of Tonkin about the seizure of a junk carrying women: “The captain of the launch named Argus met during a cruise in the Hạ Long Bay a Chinese junk traveling to China and transporting five Annamese women tied up and hidden. When questioned, they declared having been shipped against their will, and accused the captain of the junk and two crewmen of having tried to get rid of them by throwing everyone into the sea when the launch was discovered.” Hà Nội, National Archives Center Number 1. File n. 76594, letter n. 2140.
5. “Prostitution has created quite a slave market in Chợ Lớn, Canton, and Hong Kong. Matrons raise female infants from poor families, bring them up, train them in the infamous occupation which awaits them and, when they reach the age of consent, they are sent to Chợ Lớn, to correspondents who, according to the subjects' beauty, sell them to rich Chinese who keep them for pleasure or sell them to brothels” (Landes 1880: 138).
6. Hà Nội, National Archives Center Number 1, File n. 8857, letter n. 881, 14 May 1904.
7. The author adds, “It is conceivable that with so limited elements of appreciation, the buyers could easily mistake about the quality of those they wanted to buy.”

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