

# *Girl with Lotus and M-16*

The Ambiguous Lineage of  
Vietnamese Revolutionary Visual Communication

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# Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

**John Michael Swinbank**





Figure 1 Đường Ngọc Cảnh (1925–2001), *Protecting the homeland protects the youth*, 1966, Screen print on rice paper, courtesy of Bridgeman Images.





**Figure 2** Tô Ngọc Vân (1906–1954), *Girl with Lilies*, 1943, Oil on canvas, 102 x 77 cm, Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi.





# Abstract

Even before the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was proclaimed and declared independent of France in 1945, the Việt Minh, the revolutionary organisation under the charismatic leadership of Hồ Chí Minh, began recruiting French-trained Vietnamese visual artists to produce visual communication materials, comprising posters, banners, billboards, murals, and other visual emblems of government.

The political and military strategies of the Vietnam wars are the stuff of legend and subject to a vast literature and endless debate. However, the political messages produced by the DRV to mobilise popular support for independence and a prolonged ‘people’s war’ against the superior military might of two world powers, France and the United States of America (USA), remain in the shadows, undervalued as shrill ideological artefacts or amusing kitsch souvenirs of communist propaganda.

In this thesis, I argue that DRV propaganda was a communist enterprise that drew on an amalgam of communist Sino-Soviet Marxist-Leninist styles, and a melange of other cultural influences, including Vietnamese literary traditions and French visual innovations. This ‘polyglot’ combination produced a vigorous cultural hybrid that was able to rise above party rhetoric and ‘speak’ to all Vietnamese in a ‘language’ they could understand.

I contend that the efficacy of DRV propaganda was enabled, inadvertently, by colonial cultural reforms in literacy and visual arts as part of the French civilising mission, which sought to promote colonial rule to the Vietnamese and French populations. Contrary to design, these cultural reforms produced startling consequences for the Vietnamese revolutionary project, including a national writing system, and, an expert cohort of artists, trained in the aesthetics and techniques of visual communication.

This thesis explores the cultural origins of DRV propaganda by considering the effects of those cultural reforms as vectors for Vietnamese nationalism, and, the motivations of the French colonial enterprise that propelled them. That cultural reform used as propaganda had unintended and perverse consequences for France’s imperial project is an enduring dialectical irony that Karl Marx himself might have found intriguing.



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The errors are mine.

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challenging conversations and hilarious research adventures down the rabbit-hole.

To you all:

Tôi xin chân thành cảm ơn vì sự giúp đỡ của mọi  
người trong thời gian vừa qua!



# Note on Text and Terms

The text style is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style* and the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* guidelines.<sup>1</sup>

Vietnamese names, phrases, and terms have been written with Vietnamese diacritics, except those that are well-known in English, such as Vietnam, Hanoi, and Saigon. Diacritics are omitted when they are not present in the original source or not known.

All author names are cited in the word order, spelling and convention that appears on the original document. Following academic convention, names in which the family name is ordered last, then the family name only is cited in later references. With names in which the family name is ordered first, as is the case with Vietnamese names, the full name is cited in later references to avoid confusion, particularly in regard to the prevalence of the family name, Nguyễn in Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora.<sup>2</sup> In instances where a scholar with a Vietnamese name has ordered the family name last and without diacritics, the citation-bibliography style follows the author's published preference.

Titles of artworks (including posters) are referred to in English. Poster titles are informed by the slogan's lead phrase, such as Đường Ngọc Cảnh's poster, *Protecting the homeland protects the youth* (see Figure 1). Translations are established or published versions, unless otherwise stated. The title of this thesis, *Girl with Lotus and M-16*, is a flight of fancy, in which I imagined referring to Đường Ngọc Cảnh's revolutionary period artwork in the manner of French colonial artwork, such as Tô Ngọc Vân's painting, *Girl with Lilies* (see Figure 2). My aim was to suggest, somewhat provocatively, the interplay and imbrication between the two periods, which are usually presupposed to be culturally antagonistic, as well as the transformation of the subject.

In this thesis, I use the terms, "Indochina" and "Vietnam," selectively and I hope in a comprehensible fashion. I use "Indochina" or "French Indochina," as the French did, to describe their Far East colony, which incorporated the modern-day territories of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. I use "Indochina" when writing about the whole region, and "Vietnam" when discussing the region without Laos and Cambodia. The word Vietnam was banned by colonial authorities until 1944 when it was relaxed to appease nationalist sentiment.<sup>3</sup> According to historians, Christopher Goscha and Alexander Woodside, the term Vietnam was not widely used and "only took off" in the Second World War (1939–1945) when nationalists, such as Hồ Chí Minh, used it as a rallying call for independence.<sup>4</sup> After 1945, I use the term "Vietnam" generally, and for the new nation-state, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, (Berkeley: University of California Press); *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17<sup>th</sup> ed., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Nguyễn is shared by an estimated 40 percent of the population in Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora.

<sup>3</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 189.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.



# Table of Contents

Author's Declaration.....	iii
Abstract.....	ix
Acknowledgements.....	xi
Note on Text and Terms.....	xiii
Table of Contents.....	xv
List of Figures.....	xvii
Abbreviations and Notes.....	xix
Reflections on Art, War, and Propaganda.....	xxi
Preface.....	xxiii
Introduction: "Tradition starts NOW!".....	1
1.1    Artists and revolutionaries and 'the propitious moment'.....	2
1.2    The ambiguity of Vietnamese propaganda art.....	8
1.3    The literature, limited and muted.....	10
1.4    A polyglot lineage.....	11
1.5    Overview of chapters.....	12
Chapter 2    The ever-evolving art of propaganda.....	15
2.1    Towards a definition of propaganda.....	16
2.2    An historical overview of propaganda.....	18
2.3    Propaganda of the Deed.....	21
2.4    Mass media and global war.....	23
2.5    Vietnamese communist propaganda.....	24
Chapter 3    Illusion, disillusion and delusion in Indochina.....	27
3.1    The civilising mission and the colonial moment.....	29
3.2    The Second French Colonial Empire.....	30
3.3 <i>Indochine: colonie d'exploitation économique</i> .....	32
3.4    Colonial culture, reform and regime security.....	35
3.5    "They built more prisons than schools".....	37
Chapter 4    Reading Propaganda: the poetry in the struggle for Vietnamese Independence.....	39
4.1    Language, identity and cross-fertilisation.....	40
4.2    Poetry, peasants, and propaganda.....	41
4.3 <i>Ca dao</i> : the poetry of protest.....	42
4.4    The development of a national script.....	43
4.5    Tapping into tradition, emulating heroines, and <i>The Tale of Kiều</i> .....	45

Chapter 5	<i>Girl with Lotus and M-16: the equivocal legacy of the École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine</i> .....	55
5.1	French ennui encounters the exotic East.....	57
5.2	The foundation of a fine arts school in Indochina .....	60
5.3	A classical curriculum .....	61
5.4	Poster making at the academy .....	65
5.5	From craft to modernity: Tardieu's legacy .....	70
	Conclusion: An ambiguous lineage with hybrid vigour .....	73
	Epilogue: Artists become soldiers.....	75
	Bibliography.....	77
Appendix A	List of Vietnamese Artists in thesis .....	85
Appendix B	List of Artists awarded the Indochina Art Prize .....	87
Appendix C	Map of French Indochina, c. 1921 .....	89
Appendix D	Map of plantations in Cochinchina, c. 1931 .....	91
Appendix E	Multilingual Vietnamese birth certificate, 1938.....	93
Appendix F	Nam Son's blueprint for a Fine Arts School in Vietnam, 1923.....	95
Appendix G	"Artist are soldiers" message from Hồ Chí Minh, 1951 .....	97



# List of Figures

Figure 1	Đường Ngọc Cảnh (1925–2001), <i>Protecting the homeland protects the youth</i> , 1966, Screen print on rice paper, courtesy of Bridgeman Images. ....	v
Figure 2	Tô Ngọc Vân (1906–1954), <i>Girl with Lilies</i> , 1943, Oil on canvas, 102 x 77 cm, Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi. ....	vii
Figure 3	Street banner, <i>Independence or death</i> , 1945, Saigon, War Remnants Museum, HCMC, photograph by the author. ....	4
Figure 4	Photograph showing Trần Văn Cẩn’s <i>Vietnam for the Vietnamese</i> , 1945, in situ Crédit foncier de l’Indochine, Hanoi, courtesy of Vietnam Military Online.....	4
Figure 5	Photograph of artists demonstrating with poster placards in Hanoi, c. 1945, courtesy of the Dogma Collection. ....	5
Figure 6	Photograph of students in the art studio of the EBAI, c. 1929, Hanoi, courtesy of Catalogue Raisonné de EBAI. ....	6
Figure 7	Photograph of the ‘resistance class’ (Tô Ngọc Vân, front centre), Đại Từ, Thái Nguyên Province, Việt Bắc, 1952, courtesy of HCMC Fine Arts University.....	6
Figure 8	Artist unknown, <i>Everyone is a soldier</i> , c. 1947, Woodblock, courtesy of Nam Trân private collection. ....	7
Figure 9	Photograph showing the Behistun Inscription (detail), c. 515 BCE, Bas-relief, Mt. Behistun, Iran, courtesy of the photographer Babek Trafreshi.....	18
Figure 10	Photograph of the Behistun Inscription overlooking the town of Kermanshah, Kermanshah Province, Iran, courtesy of Kochar Tours, Iran.....	19
Figure 11	Photograph of the second hijacked-plane approaching the South Tower of the World Trade Centre, New York, September 11, 2001, courtesy of photographer Seth McAllister.....	22
Figure 12	Adolphe Braun et Cie, postcard showing the exterior view of the Palais de l’Indochine, Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris 1931. ....	27
Figure 13	“Điện Biên Phủ has fallen,” <i>Le Parisien</i> , May 9, 1954, signalling the end of French intervention in Indochina, courtesy of Alpha History.....	38
Figure 14	Hồ Chí Minh (1890–1969), <i>The poor eat poorly</i> , 1942, Illustration, <i>Viet Nam Doc Lap</i> , courtesy of the Vietnam Museum of Revolution, Hanoi.....	44
Figure 15	Artist unknown, <i>Vietnam in my heart</i> , n.d., Woodblock, courtesy of the Dogma Collection. ....	46
Figure 16	Artist unknown, <i>Stop, colonialists, imperialists, traitors, before you think of taking Vietnam</i> , n.d., Gouache, courtesy of the Dogma Collection.....	47
Figure 17	Dương Ánh (1934–), <i>Lê Thị Hồng Gấm made a determined attack on the enemy’s position</i> , 1970, Gouache, courtesy of the David Heather Collection.....	49
Figure 18	Nguyễn Bích (1925–2011), <i>Vietnam Total Victory</i> , n.d, Mixed media, as reproduced in Nguyen Ngoc Dung, “Why Vietnam Won the War,” 63. ....	51
Figure 19	Artist unknown, <i>The world must have peace</i> , n.d., Gouache, courtesy of the Dogma Collection. ....	52
Figure 20	Unidentifiable signature, <i>Victory is ours</i> , 1963, Gouache, courtesy of the Dogma Collection. ....	52

Figure 21	Artist unknown, <i>Peace throughout all Vietnam</i> , 1975, Gouache, courtesy of War Remnants Museum, HCMC. ....	53
Figure 22	Street banner, <i>Live with all your heart and desire</i> , 2015, 40 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reunification of Vietnam, Illuminations, HCMC, photograph by the author. ....	54
Figure 23	Photograph of Victor Tardieu (1870-1937) in front of his work <i>Metropole</i> in the main auditorium of the University of Indochina, Hanoi, c. 1926, courtesy of Catalogue Raisonné: EBAI.....	58
Figure 24	Photograph of Nam Sơn (Nguyễn Văn Thọ, 1890–1973) in 1919, courtesy of the artist’s family archives.....	59
Figure 25	Photograph of Victor Tardieu, front centre, and Nam Sơn, front right, with teachers and students of the EBAI, Hanoi, c. 1930, courtesy Nguyễn Văn Ninh private collection.....	60
Figure 26	Photograph of a life-drawing class at the EBAI, c. 1925, courtesy of Fine Arts Publishers, Hanoi. ....	62
Figure 27	A war artist’s kit, including easel, brushes, tube, and satchel inscribed “Cặp vẽ Nguyễn Hoàng - Vượt Trường Sơn,” c. 1972, Central Highlands, HCMC Museum of Fine Arts, photograph by author.....	63
Figure 28	Nguyễn Khang (1912–1989), <i>Glorious Return of a Man of Letters to his Village</i> , 1944, Lacquer, 80 x 183,7 cm, Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi.....	64
Figure 29	Phan Kế An (1923–2018), <i>Memories of the Northwest</i> , 1958, Lacquer, 112 x 70 cm, Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi. ....	64
Figure 30	Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), <i>France-Champagne</i> , 1891, Lithograph, courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington.....	65
Figure 31	Victor Tardieu (1870–1937), <i>Hospital in the Oatfield</i> , 1915, Oil on canvas, courtesy of the Florence Nightingale Museum, London. ....	66
Figure 32	Hồ Văn Lai (c. 1907 – unknown), <i>For your next pleasure trip choose this time ... French Indochina</i> , 1938, Lithograph, 64 x 84 cm, courtesy of The Ross Art Group. ....	67
Figure 33	Jos-Henri Ponchin (1897–1981), <i>French Indochina is the ideal land for tourism</i> , 1931, Lithograph, 112 x 75 cm, courtesy of Saigoneer.....	68
Figure 34	Jos-Henri Ponchin (1897–1981), <i>French Indochina</i> , 1931, Lithograph, 112 x 75 cm, courtesy of LiveAuctioneers.....	69
Figure 35	Artist unknown, <i>Ready to chastise the American invaders</i> , Gouache, c. 1960s, courtesy of the Dogma Collection.....	69
Figure 36	Trần Văn Cẩn (1910–1994), <i>Coastal Militia Woman</i> , 1960, Oil on canvas, Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi. ....	72

# Abbreviations and Notes

- CPV Communist Party of Vietnam (from 1976), founding and ruling political party of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). Originally known as the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) from 1930 to 1946, and then the Vietnamese Worker's Party (VWP) from 1951 to 1976. The supremacy of the CPV is guaranteed by Article 4 of the Vietnamese Constitution. The CPV maintains a unitary government with centralised control over the State, military, and media.
- DRV Democratic Republic of Vietnam, established in 1945. After 1955, also known as North Vietnam. On July 2, 1976, North and South Vietnam were merged to form the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV).
- EBAI École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine [The Fine Arts School of Indochina / Trường Cao Đẳng Mỹ Thuật Đông Dương], established in Hanoi by colonial decree in October 1924.
- HCMC Hồ Chí Minh City, adopted in 1976 in honour of the late communist leader, is the most recent of different names that have reflected the changes in cultural settlement and political control, including Baigur (Champa, eleventh century), Prey Nokor (Khmer, from 1145, and still used by Cambodians today), Sài Gòn (colloquial Vietnamese, seventeenth century), Gia Định (official Vietnamese, from 1692), Saïgon (French from 1862). Today, the pre-1975 name (with diacritics) is often used by locals and preferred by the Vietnamese diaspora. However, HCMC refers to a broader area, including the cities of Saigon and Chợ Lớn, two other provinces' urban districts, and the whole of Gia Định Province.
- ICP Indochinese Communist Party.
- NLF Also NLFSV, National Liberation Front for South Vietnam. The organisation and its members were referred to by opponents as Việt Cộng, a contraction of the phrases, Việt Nam cộng sản [Vietnamese communist], and, Việt gian cộng sản [communist traitor to Vietnam].<sup>1</sup> The origins of the term lie in the 1920s and 1930s power struggle between Vietnamese communist and nationalist (that is, non-communist) revolutionaries, who accused each other of

<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Defense, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States decision making on Vietnam*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 242-314.

being Việt gian [traitor to the Vietnamese race].<sup>2</sup> The contraction Việt Cộng first appeared in Saigon newspapers in 1956 and was popularised by American journalists, and US military, largely unaware of its negative connotations.

- PAVN People's Army of Vietnam (Quân Đội Nhân Dân Việt Nam), also known as the Vietnamese People's Army (VPA) grew out of the Armed Propaganda Brigade for the Liberation of Vietnam formed in 1944 by General Võ Nguyên Giáp with 31 men and three women. During the First Indochina War (1946–1954), the PAVN was often referred to as the Việt Minh. In the Second Indochina War (1955–1975), the army was also referred to as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).<sup>3</sup> The PAVN flag is the national flag inscribed with the motto Quyết thắng [Determined to win].
- RVN Republic of Vietnam, established in 1955, often referred to as South Vietnam.
- Việt Minh Shortened form of Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội [League for the Independence of Vietnam], a political and military organisation formed in 1941 by Hồ Chí Minh and dominated by the outlawed Indochinese Communist Party that established itself as the only organized anti-French and anti-Japanese resistance group.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Brett Reilly, "The True Origin of the Term Viet Cong," *The Diplomat*, January 31, 2018, n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, translated by Merle L. Pribbenow, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 68.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hunt, *The World Transformed: 1945 to the present*, 1st ed., (UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 124.

# Reflections on Art, War, and Propaganda

“A picture is worth a thousand words.” Anon.<sup>1</sup>

“A picture is a poem without words.” Horace.<sup>2</sup>

“Art is not detached but is actually glued together with politics.”<sup>3</sup>

“Art is only real art if it becomes propaganda.” Trường Chinh.<sup>4</sup>

“Propaganda is [...] a fantasy or conspiracy we share.” Nicholas O’Shaughnessy.<sup>5</sup>

“The only defence against propaganda is more propaganda”. Edward Bernays.<sup>6</sup>

“Creativity takes courage.” Henri Matisse.<sup>7</sup>

“Artists are soldiers too.” Hồ Chí Minh.<sup>8</sup>

“Paintings are instruments of war.” Pablo Picasso.<sup>9</sup>

“There is art in the country, the loss of country,  
the loss of freedom is the loss of everything.” Nguyễn Sang<sup>10</sup>

“If we were all artists, there would be no war.” Nguyễn Thụ.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Twentieth-century aphorism.

<sup>2</sup> Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65 BC–8 BC), Roman poet known in the English-speaking world as Horace.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous Vietnamese artist, 1951, quoted in Phoebe Scott, “Forming and Reforming the Artist: modernity, agency and the discourse of art in North Vietnam, 1925–1954,” (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Vietnamese communist political leader and theoretician.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction*, 1st ed., (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Manchester University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Austrian-American pioneer in the fields of propaganda and public relations. Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998), 102, for the quotation.

<sup>7</sup> Henri Matisse (1869–1954), French painter, and a classmate of Victor Tardieu (1870-1937), EBAI founder.

<sup>8</sup> Vietnamese communist political leader; Prime Minister (1945–55) and President (1945–69) of the DRV (see Appendix D, for the quotation).

<sup>9</sup> Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Spanish painter.

<sup>10</sup> Nguyễn Sáng (1923–1988), Vietnamese war artist (EBAI graduate 1941–1945).

<sup>11</sup> Nguyễn Thụ (1930–2018), Vietnamese war artist (College of Fine Arts of Vietnam graduate 1955–1962).



# Preface

I became mesmerised.

After three years ‘on the road’ between Singapore, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, I was on my way home to Western Australia in early 2015, to reclaim my apartment from my tenants, rebase my public relations practice in Perth, and return, at last, to academic study. Before knuckling down, I was having a last hurrah wandering the byways of Asia, losing myself on ‘infinity’ beaches, in blood-red sunsets, in the soothing thrum of village life and the exciting cacophony of ancient, burgeoning cities.

Pausing in Hồ Chí Minh City for three weeks of ‘yoga-chill’ to prepare for my immersion at Murdoch University, I was keen to lose myself in the city’s fabled charm. High on my list were its tree-lined boulevards, rooftop bars, and exquisite cuisine, and the chance to hear Mozart’s double piano concerto at the Opera House, one moment, and ride pillion on a motorbike around Bến Thành concourse at peak hour, the next. What I did not expect was an astonishing confrontation at the War Remnants Museum, the country’s foremost curator of the mid-twentieth-century wars that have shaped, wrought and defined modern Vietnam.

There, amid the shiny American ‘Huey’ helicopter in the courtyard, the harrowing Agent Orange displays inside, and the sorrowing stories of thirty years of internationalised conflict, was an exhibition of Vietnamese propaganda posters that captured my attention. A kaleidoscope of colours, ideas, and emotions, bravado, determination, triumphalism, and joy leapt across the years. As I gazed, it was as if the posters gazed back at me, and as I slipped deeper under their spell, I wondered what their story was. Who had made them, how and why?

As I returned home, I realised that another journey was beginning. I had become mesmerised by the Vietnamese posters’ aestheticised images and artful words and could not shut up about them. Thus, I entered the fascinating and fractious world of Vietnamese Studies. Two degrees, four years, and eight kilos later, it has not been a comfortable journey. Competing workloads, a vast contradictory literature, historiographical issues as reliable as quicksand, Kafka-like research puzzles, and the spectre of propaganda and its Orwellian opprobrium, have stalked my academic study. Any one of those things could fell an elephant and that I am still standing is entirely due to the strength, encouragement, generosity and determination of my academic supervisors and colleagues, and the best of new and old friends. And my splendid canary Nai Noi,<sup>1</sup> whose ecstatic singing has lightened many a dark afternoon and reminds me that sometimes you just have to sing like no one’s listening.

As to the posters of the Vietnamese revolution, I remain mesmerised. Another journey awaits.

<sup>1</sup> Chao Nai Noi Narak Payuk Hern Fah (เจ้านายน้อยนารักพยับหมอกฟ้า) [Prince Little Boss Pretty Boy Flying Tiger].





**“Vietnam ...  
a Kafka-like nightmare for anyone seeking facts.”<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, (Cambridge, Mass: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1966), 66.



# Introduction: “Tradition starts NOW!”

Art and politics are intertwined in the story of modern Vietnam, as are the artists and revolutionaries who told it. From the earliest days of the Vietnamese revolution in 1945, exhortatory slogans were given visual life in the communication forms of posters, banners, billboards and murals. Throughout three decades of almost unceasing hostilities, visual propaganda materials were used to communicate political messages of social revolution, resilience and transformation to a traditionally pre-literate population dispersed predominantly throughout rural and pre-broadcast Vietnam. The visual style and iconography developed during this era is still in evidence today, reproduced in the same principle communication forms, now with the digital extension of the Internet and social media platforms.

The political strategies and military campaigns of the mid-twentieth century wars of independence, resistance and reunification, known collectively as the Indochina Wars,<sup>1</sup> are the stuff of legend and subject to a vast literature and endless debate. However, the politicised visual communication produced by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) to mobilise popular support for the war effort remains in the shadows, undervalued as shrill ideological artefacts or amusing kitsch souvenirs of communist propaganda.

In this thesis, I argue that DRV propaganda was a multicultural enterprise that drew on an amalgam of Sino-Soviet Marxist-Leninist styles, exemplified by socialist realism,<sup>2</sup> and a melange of other cultural influences, including Vietnamese literary traditions and French visual innovations. This startling ‘polyglot’ lineage produced a vigorous cultural hybrid that was able to rise above party rhetoric and ‘speak’ to all Vietnamese in a ‘language’ they could understand.

Several startling facts of Vietnamese cultural history illuminate this dissertation about the origins of Vietnamese visual communication. One, that the leading Vietnamese artists responsible for the visual culture of the anti-colonial revolution were all trained by French artistic experts introduced and sponsored by the colonial state.<sup>3</sup> In turn, these artists trained subsequent generations, developing lineages of artist-master relationships that can be traced back to a French source.<sup>4</sup> And two, for the first time in history, a unitary Vietnamese nation-

<sup>1</sup> A series of conflicts fought on the Southeast Asian mainland from 1946 until 1989: First Indochina War (1946–1954); Second Indochina war (1955–1975); and, Third Indochina War (1975–1991), an inter-connected and largely inter-communist series of conflicts primarily between Vietnam and China, prompted by Vietnam’s deposition of the Khmer Rouge regime, but also including involving Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand.

<sup>2</sup> Despite its name, a style of idealised art characterised by a glorified depiction of communist values, promoting production, patriotism, heroism and the party. Developed in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, socialist realism was adopted as a cultural policy in other communist countries emerging after WWII.

<sup>3</sup> Art historians I have relied on include Phoebe Scott, Nora Annesley Taylor, and Huynh Boi Tran, with additional material from Phan Le Xuan writing in French, and Quang Phòng and Quang Việt writing in Vietnamese and English.

<sup>4</sup> Trần Văn Căn, *Contemporary Vietnamese Painters*, (Hanoi: Red River Foreign Languages Publishing House 1987), 5-7.

state (that is, the DRV), from inception was able to communicate all of its affairs of state to its sovereign people in a shared national language script, *chữ Quốc ngữ*, which had been instigated and promoted through the French colonial education system.<sup>5</sup>

I contend in this thesis, that, simply put, without the ‘words’ and ‘images’ enabled by French colonial reforms, Vietnamese visual communication may not have succeeded in its mission to mobilise and galvanise a population to support an attenuated and agonising era of war.

## 1.1 Artists and revolutionaries and ‘the propitious moment’

Vietnamese revolutionary visual communication began as ‘protest art’ during the last summer of the Second World War (1939–1945) as independence ‘fever’ swept Indochina. French colonial rule had collapsed caused by tension in the collaborative relationship between the pro-Nazi Vichy French administration<sup>6</sup> and Germany’s Axis ally, Japan.<sup>7</sup>

The end had come, like nightfall in the tropics, with astonishing swiftness, catching all by surprise, none more so than the French. On the evening of March 9, 1945, a coup d’état, codenamed Operation *Bright Moon* [*Meigo Sakusen*], by Japanese armed forces, permitted in the colony since 1940, overthrew the crumbling Vichy French regime, routing garrisons throughout the colony and interning French civil and military leaders, and plantation owners.<sup>8</sup> Urging Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian independence movements to declare themselves, Japan dissolved the French colonial state, the Indochinese Union<sup>9</sup> into the kingdoms of Kampuchea and Laos, and the Empire of Vietnam, as members of Japan’s imperial construct known as the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” All proved to be tenuous and highly contested, but the febrility of French control was revealed to all as Japan in a matter of weeks had dismantled France’s Far Eastern enterprise as ruthlessly and violently as it had been pieced together during the previous eighty years.<sup>10</sup>

A catastrophe for the French colonialists, the coup was a remarkable opportunity for Vietnamese nationalists of all political persuasions to begin what could be described as a ‘cultural revolution’. A process of ‘decolonisation’ and ‘Vietnamisation’ began with alacrity, without fear of French repression or reprisal.<sup>11</sup> Thousands of French-educated Vietnamese

<sup>5</sup> Historians I have relied on, include Benedict Anderson, Pierre Brocheux, William Duiker, Christopher Goscha, Daniel Hémery, and David Marr.

<sup>6</sup> Vichy, a spa resort town in southern France, became the seat of government and the common name for the French State (1940–1944), which administered metropolitan France (including Algeria) and the colonial empire, as a client state of Nazi Germany, following the capitulation of France in 1940.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 362.

<sup>8</sup> David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Commonly referred to as French Indochina, which controlled five contiguous ‘provinces’, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam divided into Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin, and an outlier, the French concession of Guangzhouan [Guangzhou Bay] in Canton (Guangzhou).

<sup>10</sup> B[ugrave] Minh Dung, “Nominal Vietnamese independence following the Japanese Coup de Force on 9 March 1945,” *Japan Forum* 6:2, (1994): 231-249.

<sup>11</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 362.

bureaucrats, journalists, teachers, writers, and artists, who had already rallied in secret to Hồ Chí Minh's independence organisation, the Viet Minh,<sup>12</sup> showed their immense value in a country with over 80 percent illiteracy, as they redirected or took over public institutions, agencies, and services.<sup>13</sup> Freed of colonial control and censorship, Vietnamese media, including newspapers, radio and telegraph stations, and poster production, spread the news of the demise of French Indochina and the imminent birth of a new independent Vietnamese nation.<sup>14</sup>

In August, Japan's own imperial dreams came to a sudden and violent end, creating a 'power vacuum' in Indochina and producing what Hồ Chí Minh called 'a propitious moment' (*thời cơ*).<sup>15</sup> On August 19, three days after the Japanese Emperor Hirohito had capitulated, the Việt Minh called for a general uprising, known as the August Revolution [*Cách mạng tháng Tám*], and in a relatively peaceful manner seized control of urban centres throughout the country.

Ahead of the declaration of independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from France on September 2, 1945, the Việt Minh openly recruited Vietnamese visual artists, including renowned painters, Tô Ngọc Vân (1906–1954), Nguyễn Sáng (1923–1988), and Trần Văn Cẩn (1910–1994), to produce visual communication materials and other emblems of government (such as presidential portraits, designs for currency and stamps) in its quest to assert political legitimacy in the eyes of all Vietnamese and the world.

The race was on to present a unified front of Vietnamese national culture as a *fait accompli*, before France, shattered by the events of the Second World War, could recover, return and regain control of its former colony.<sup>16</sup> The capital of Hanoi, once known as the 'Paris of the East', was transformed. Colonial infrastructure was removed, repurposed or renamed.<sup>17</sup> Public monuments were pulled down and colonial street names changed to honour Vietnamese heroes, except those honouring Alexandre Yersin (1863–1943), the Nha Trang based discoverer of the bacterium responsible for history's most deadly pandemic, the Black Death.<sup>18</sup> Indochina's colonial façade was symbolically and literally stripped away, or placarded with politicised paintings, posters and banners, such as *Independence or death*, promoting a new and a 'Vietnamese' Vietnam (see Figure 3).

<sup>12</sup> A national independence coalition founded by in 1941 as Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội [League for the Independence of Vietnam].

<sup>13</sup> David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920–1945*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1981), 12.

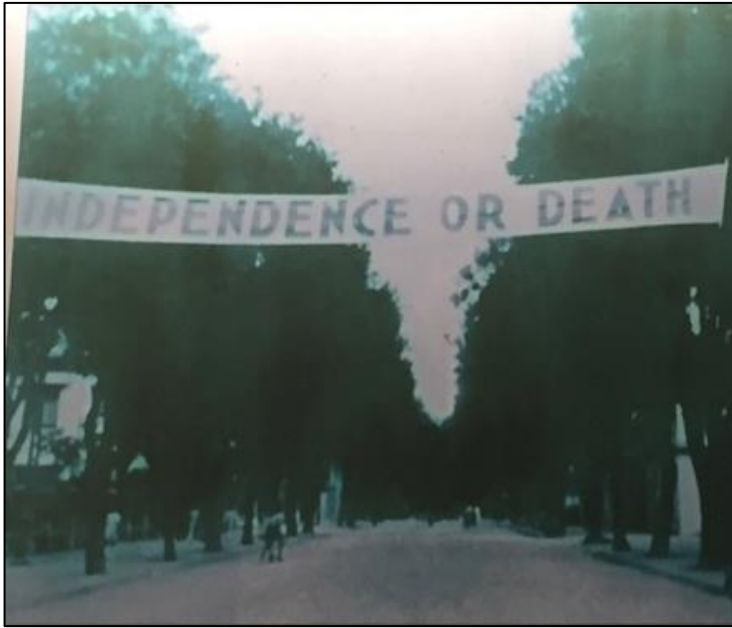
<sup>14</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 362.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Goscha, "A 'Total War' of Decolonization? Social Mobilization and State-Building in Communist Vietnam (1949–54)," *War & Society* 31, no. 2, (2012): 802.

<sup>16</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 361.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>18</sup> Yersin's discovery and later development of a vaccine at his laboratory at Nha Trang, ended centuries of existential turmoil surrounding the terrifying disease. Yersin is venerated in Vietnam, where he is known as "Ông Năm" [Fifth Uncle] - Hồ Chí Minh is "First Uncle" - and was made an honorary citizen of Vietnam, posthumously, in 2014.



**Figure 3** Street banner, *Independence or death*, 1945, Saigon, War Remnants Museum, HCMC, photograph by the author.

Large-format compositions, including Nguyễn Sáng's *Unity*, were also displayed publicly in the city centre. Trần Văn Cẩn's poster, *Vietnam for the Vietnamese* was plastered over the exterior of the Crédit foncier de l'Indochine [Land Credit of Indochina], a French banking monopoly that provided land mortgages predominantly to French companies (see Figure 4).<sup>19</sup> Many artists displayed advocacy artworks around Hoàn Kiếm Lake (Lake of the Returned Sword) and paraded in the historical centre of Hanoi (see Figure 5).



**Figure 4** Photograph showing Trần Văn Cẩn's *Vietnam for the Vietnamese*, 1945, in situ Crédit foncier de l'Indochine, Hanoi, courtesy of Vietnam Military Online.

<sup>19</sup> Quang Phòng and Quang Việt, *Arts of the City of Hanoi*, (Hanoi: NXB Mỹ thuật, 1998), 411.



**Figure 5 Photograph of artists demonstrating with poster placards in Hanoi, c. 1945, courtesy of the Dogma Collection.**

Among the first generation of Vietnamese artists of this story is the celebrated painter Tô Ngọc Vân, a star graduate (1926–1931) and teacher (1939–1945) at the French colonial art academy, l'École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine [The Fine Arts School of Indochina], hereafter the EBAI.<sup>20</sup> Closed since the Japanese coup d'état in March 1945, the EBAI was reconstituted by Tô Ngọc Vân as the DRV's premier fine arts school, Trường Trung Cấp Mỹ Thuật [Fine Arts School] in Hanoi. Seeing the opportunity as a new beginning for Vietnamese art, he famously declared, "Tradition starts now,"<sup>21</sup> verbally severing the last twenty years of French influence as expeditiously as Madame la Guillotine herself.

When war loomed between the DRV and France, Tô Ngọc Vân closed the school and rallied the artistic community in the mountainous jungles of the Việt Bắc, known as the 'Resistance Zones'.<sup>22</sup> The white linen suits of the colonial academy, along with the taint of collaboration, were discarded in favour of jungle-green khakis and the camaraderie of the new 'resistance class' [Khóa Kháng Chiến] (see Figure 6 and Figure 7).<sup>23</sup> 'Art for art's sake' as exemplified by the French Academic tradition was dead, and 'Art for the people' was brought to life by guerrilla-artists on the run in the steamy jungles and misty mountains of the Vietnamese 'resistance'.

<sup>20</sup> Discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>21</sup> "Bây giờ mới có hội họa Việt Nam", quoted in *Van Nghe*, Spring (1949); recounted by Trần Văn Căn in 1983, quoted in Nora Annesley Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 155.

<sup>22</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 357.

<sup>23</sup> Informal name for the revolutionary period art school.



**Figure 6** Photograph of students in the art studio of the EBAI, c. 1929, Hanoi, courtesy of Catalogue Raisonné de EBAI.



**Figure 7** Photograph of the 'resistance class' (Tô Ngọc Vân, front centre), Đại Từ, Thái Nguyên Province, Việt Bắc, 1952, courtesy of HCMC Fine Arts University.



As Hồ Chí Minh had hoped when he urged artists to find the spirit of resistance in culture, and vice versa (“Kháng chiến hóa văn hóa, văn hóa hóa kháng chiến”) [*resistance in culture, and culture in resistance*],<sup>24</sup> an artistic tradition was forged in the fight for independence. As the fledgling nation went to war to assert its independence, artists were vital to the DRV’s campaigns to mobilise popular support for a ‘people’s war’ against the superior military might of two world powers, France and the United States of America (USA). ‘Art’ was now to serve ‘the people’ of the new nation of Vietnam, and artists were to serve state propaganda, for the next thirty years of war. As the propaganda campaign exhorted, “Everyone [every citizen] is a soldier,” now (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8** Artist unknown, *Everyone is a soldier*, c. 1947, Woodblock, courtesy of Nam Trân private collection.

<sup>24</sup> Nora Annesley Taylor, “The Artist and the State: The Politics of Painting and National Identity in Hanoi, Vietnam 1925–1995,” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1997), 103.

## 1.2 The ambiguity of Vietnamese propaganda art

When Tô Ngọc Vân officially ‘killed off’ the French concept of art he may have been providing a new identity to the artists in his charge, as Taylor has argued,<sup>25</sup> as well as an ideological shield at a time when the taint of ‘collaborator’, or Việt gian [traitor to the Vietnamese race] could be a death sentence. However, in practice, the links to the past were not severed at all. Indeed, the aesthetics, philosophies, and techniques, assiduously imparted by an expert faculty of French artist-teachers imbued the artist-cadres of the new state. The irony is that their mission was to produce images for propaganda materials that would exhort the population to unite and to make war against superior world powers, France and USA. Thanks to French influence, instruction and techniques, the visual communication materials they produced inspired the Vietnamese population to imagine a better future and to reimagine a glorious past, no matter how unbearable, as history shows us, the present became. Tô Ngọc Vân’s phrase, “Tradition starts now,” was an illusion. It is not the only illusion with which this thesis is concerned.

This thesis investigates the cultural roots of the visual communication forms deployed by the DRV during the first two of the three Indochina Wars. From the outset, the wars had an ideological dimension, which was divisive and contentious, as is evident in the nomenclature of the conflicts. The First Indochina War (1946–1954) was a conflict between the Việt Minh backed by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC),<sup>26</sup> and the colonising power, France backed by the USA. In Vietnam, the war is referred to as the “Anti-French Resistance War.” In France, the war was dubbed by political opponents “la sale guerre” [the dirty war].<sup>27</sup> The Second Indochina War (1955–1975)<sup>28</sup> was between the DRV, backed by the USSR and the PRC, and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) backed by the USA and a coalition of nations.<sup>29</sup> The latter war is widely known in the West as the “Vietnam War” and in Vietnam as the “Resistance War Against America” [Kháng chiến chống Mỹ] or “American War.”

The origins and outcomes of both the French and the American wars are extensively studied and discussed from many perspectives, but Vietnamese visual communication, which played a significant role in those conflicts, is understudied, sidelined as a shrill artefact or kitsch souvenir of a medium designed to impart a communist dogma. In part, this thesis seeks to review and

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Following the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949), Mao Zedong proclaimed the PRC on September 21, 1949, and later supported the DRV with Chinese military advisers and materiel.

<sup>27</sup> Debra Kelly and Valerie Holman, *France at War in the Twentieth Century: Propaganda, Myth and Metaphor*, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 145.

<sup>28</sup> In 1998, the US Department of Defense changed the start date of the Second Indochina War to November 1, 1955. Some scholars prefer different dates, such as 1956 when Hanoi via the NLF began low-level insurgency in South Vietnam, or, 1959 when the Việt Cộng first engaged the ARVN.

<sup>29</sup> The RVN support, led by the USA, included Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Taiwan.

reframe communist visual legacy, particularly the visual culture of communist revolutionary Vietnam. The entrenched bias in the West against the concept of propaganda, particularly totalitarian forms, has obscured the merits for study and analysis of Vietnamese propaganda. Moreover, the same prejudice obscures the fact that Western democracies have also produced propaganda promoting their own national interests (often in the name of democracy) while denouncing opposing propaganda of rivals as manipulative and deceitful.

While mindful of historian Peter Burke's advice to view primary sources not as "unproblematic reflections of their times",<sup>30</sup> it is less important for the purpose of this thesis to determine if the information contained in the propaganda is true or false, or if the cause is just or not, than it is to examine the presentation of the information to discern the management of the communication. That said, it is important to discuss the Vietnamese communist visual culture without being mesmerised by its propaganda effect.

Scholars, Pearl James and Hunter Hollins have asserted that there is historical value and insight in the study of propaganda posters that mobilised populations during the world wars of the twentieth century. In his study of Second World War posters promoting national cohesion in the USA, Hollins argues that the historical value of the propaganda poster lies in a "succinct view of a past era" and its representation of "contemporary public values, ideologies and common goals".<sup>31</sup> His compatriot Pearl James, editing a book of essays about First World War posters, argues that the poster "with its idealised theme, allows us to identify an underlying pattern of shared vision within a mass culture."<sup>32</sup> My research seeks to address the gap in the English language literature covering the Vietnamese propaganda posters.

Due to decades of war and post-war renovation, innumerable propaganda artefacts have been lost, displaced or damaged. Nevertheless, there are approximately 3,000 original Vietnamese posters held in public and private collections, chief among those being the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), the Dogma Collection, and the David Heather Collection, as well as museums in Vietnam and around the world. In Hanoi and HCMC there are many outlets that sell copies (and some spurious 'originals') of DRV posters to the tourist market as souvenirs and collectables. In the digital era, vintage images of DRV wartime posters have also proliferated on the Internet, and are shared, collected and purchased by enthusiasts. This vast, uncontrolled, 'cottage' industry suggests that there is a real interest in the revolutionary posters of Vietnam, particularly in the West.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), 20.

<sup>31</sup> Hunter Hollins, "The War Bond Poster: State Fundraising and National Cohesion Through Mass Media During the World Wars," *Federal History Journal*, Issue 7 (2015): 36.

<sup>32</sup> Pearl James, *Picture This: WWI Posters & Visual Culture*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 1.

### 1.3 The literature, limited and muted

There are no comprehensive studies of the primary sources of DRV visual propaganda. There is a gap in English language material directly discussing the Vietnamese visual propaganda (in particular, political posters, of which there are many extant examples). This study undertakes to examine a small sample of DRV wartime posters, which have been subjectively chosen to illustrate this discussion about the cultural origins of these artefacts.

Three English language compendia of Vietnamese posters, including war and peace time artefacts, have so far been published, in collaboration or with approval for publication granted by the Vietnamese government.<sup>33</sup> None provides complete poster details; nor detailed analysis; and only Le Van Vien's *Vietnam Poster & Billboards*, is still in print through Thế Giới, Vietnam's official foreign language publishing house (established in 1957).

Unfortunately, as observed by art historian Huynh Boi Tran, the process of data collection from Vietnamese publications is made more difficult due to "a veil of ideological doctrine and criticism favouring Socialism [that] always covers them."<sup>34</sup> Though there is increased access to official materials, since the Đổi Mới [renovation] reform era, any disruption to the official narrative in Vietnam remains problematic and not without risk. There is propaganda about propaganda, making analyses more fraught than ever.

There are few discussions available in the English language literature that focus on the Vietnamese wartime visual propaganda directly. Political scientist Thaveeporn Vasavakul's article discusses nationalistic elements in posters during the three Indochina wars.<sup>35</sup> Historian, Joel Montague and art historian, Nora Taylor's article on posters produced between 1965 and 1985 highlights the links between the Vietnamese village tradition of economical wordplay to sloganeering, and the agency of artists in the production of political posters.<sup>36</sup> Journalist, Sherry Buchanan's essay for a British Museum exhibition discusses the role artists played as cadres of the DRV state.<sup>37</sup> Another exhibition catalogue written by academic Nguyen Ngoc Dung provides insight into the official view of the visual propaganda, as well as a selection of annotated posters.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Dominic Scriven, et al, *Dogma: Morale from the Ministry*, 1st ed., (Ho Chi Minh City: HCMC General Publishing House, 2005); David Heather and Sherry Buchanan, *Vietnam Posters: The David Heather Collection*, 1st ed., (Munich; London; New York, N.Y: Prestel, 2009); Le Van Vien, *Vietnam Posters & Billboards*, 1st ed., (Ho Chi Minh City: The Gioi Publishing House / Artbook, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Huynh Boi Tran, "Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 Onwards," (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2005), 2.

<sup>35</sup> Thaveeporn Vasavakul, "Art and Politics: Nationalism in Vietnamese War Posters," *The Asia Pacific Magazine*, Vol. 8, (1997): 3-6.

<sup>36</sup> Joel Montague and Nora Annesley Taylor, "North Vietnamese Propaganda Posters 1965-1985," *Vietnam*, 04 (2007): 36-43.

<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Harrison-Hall, *Vietnam Behind the Lines: Images from the War*, (London: The British Museum Press, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> Nguyen Ngoc Dung, "Why Viet Nam Won the War," in *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Vietnam and Cuba 1965-1975*, (Santa Monica: Smart View Press, 1996).

There are several art history sources in the English language that focus on visual culture produced in the Vietnamese colonial and revolutionary periods, principally Nora Taylor's seminal academic art-historical study *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*. Based on her PhD dissertation and artist interviews, Taylor's account focusses on the production of art in northern Vietnam (centring on Hanoi) in the colonial and revolutionary periods, and beyond.<sup>39</sup> There are also significant PhD dissertations by Huynh Boi Tran,<sup>40</sup> and, Phoebe Scott.<sup>41</sup> Huynh Boi Tran focusses on Vietnamese artistic traditions and practices, widening her scope to include southern Vietnam, (centring on Saigon), later the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Huynh Boi Tran offers insights into cultural hybridity while being critical of the DRV propaganda restrictions on individual art production. Like Taylor, Scott focusses on art production in northern Vietnam, and provides a special view of the artistic discourse in the DRV artistic community particularly when Marxist-Leninist-Maoist cultural theories of propaganda production began to confront and curtail artistic freedoms.

## 1.4 A polyglot lineage

In this thesis, I argue that it is the variety of artistic influences and cultural resonances, the polyglot lineage of Vietnamese propaganda art, and the circumstances under which it was created, that differentiate it from almost all other iterations of communist propaganda. Furthermore, I argue that it is the lyricism of the Vietnamese iteration of communist propaganda that allows the message to transcend stereotypical communist party rhetoric of socialist realism to find its own voice and address a deep cultural need. This unique lyricism arises from a fusion of traditional Vietnamese literary roots with modernist Western art techniques, and, advertising's seductive fantasies with Sino-Soviet propaganda expertise.

With their startling imagery and resonant themes, blend of the modern and the traditional, and juxtaposition of the familiar with the new, the DRV's political posters represented a new but familiar voice to their targeted audience. As historian Mark Bradley observed, Vietnamese communist propaganda was the first to address the rural population directly.<sup>42</sup> Previous nationalist communication was centred on and contained within an urban, highly educated, and much smaller audience. However, the majority of the Vietnamese population were based in rural communities and historically illiterate. A poster bearing a striking image and short-phrased slogan was an ideal conveyor of complex ideology for this audience.

As the principal channel of communication between the state and its sovereign people, the posters are integrally involved in the nation's history. As propaganda, they shaped public

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*.

<sup>40</sup> Huynh Boi Tran, "Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 Onwards," (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Phoebe Scott, "Forming and reforming the artist," (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27.

thought and understanding of what it meant to be Vietnamese and what that required. In this sense, the propaganda posters shaped and reflected the shared aspirations of Vietnamese society. Inexorably, DRV posters became part of daily life and the physical and imaginary landscape of the nation of Vietnam.

The scope of the achievement of Vietnamese independence and self-determination, following nearly a century of colonial rule and then thirty years of war, cannot be overestimated. Nor can it be wholly explained by political and military means alone. The role of propaganda in the mobilisation of sustained public support for the revolutionary project is at the heart of this research enquiry.

## 1.5 Overview of chapters

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 discusses the concept and history of the term propaganda and the different ways it has been employed to communicate complex ideas about politics, ideology, and society. The chapter considers how propaganda's reputation as 'a dark art' has evolved in the last century resulting in an obscuring of its merit for study and analysis.

Chapter 3 considers the effects of the French civilising mission (*mission civilisatrice*), a rationale for colonialism that purported to bring the benefits of civilisation, that is, western modernisation, to the indigenous populations of Indochina. Projected to the metropole and the world stage, the French civilising mission was an ambiguous smoke and mirrors gambit that disguised the colonial enterprise's less than altruistic motives of economic exploitation, social and bureaucratic control, and regime security. Ironically, colonial propaganda in the guise of the *mission civilisatrice* was responsible for the educational reforms that had a profound effect on Vietnamese literacy and visual culture, and inadvertently, enabled the anti-colonial communication management and propaganda.

Chapter 4 discusses the literary roots of the DRV visual communication forms, following the colonial introduction of *chữ Quốc ngữ* [national language script]. The chapter discusses the continuities between Vietnamese oral and written traditions of poetry and the slogans, images, and themes, of the DRV's political posters in three parts. First, that there was a pre-existing tradition of conveying complex messages through short phrases and wordplay, such as poetic couplets, lyrics, riddles, adages and maxims developed over millennia in Vietnamese oral and folk poetry. Second, the predominant visual communication motifs of heroism, resistance to invaders, and sacrifice are part of a rich tradition in Vietnamese poetry and storytelling. Finally, the visual short message form of the poster provided an effective mechanism for the Vietnamese communists to communicate directly with the pre-literate and pre-broadcast but culturally rich rural majority, who had been ignored by previous revolutionary elites. Combined, these key elements enabled the rural audience to 'read' the image-saturated messages and complex

political messages and to mobilise in support of the revolutionary project. Thus, through a common language and shared visual culture, the Vietnamese visual communications connected peasants and elites, the past and the present, to offer a vision of a future utopia: a blueprint for national salvation and the 'ideal society' for all Vietnamese.

Having discussed the 'words', Chapter 5 investigates the 'images' that make up the Vietnamese visual communication artform. The chapter discusses the influence of the EBAI, the French colonial art academy on the visual culture of the Vietnamese revolutionary project. Established by colonial decree in 1924 and the personal agency of charismatic individuals, this unique fine arts school became a vortex of classical and radical ideas, an incubator of nationalist visual culture, and a facilitator for the transfer of exceptional artistic and vocational skills, including poster production. Not that anyone knew it at the time, the French colonial authorities were inadvertently equipping an expert 'army' of artists for revolution.

The thesis concludes with a recapitulation of the main points of the previous discussions, and reasserts the major issues of the argument: one, the production of images for the revolutionary project owes a debt to French aesthetics and techniques; two, the French were influential in the acculturation of propaganda sloganeering via the instigation and promotion of a new official writing system, *chữ Quốc ngữ*; and three, the flows and contraflows between the colonial and revolutionary periods contributed to the universal lyricism and the enduring resonance of Vietnamese visual communication.

Influenced by a melting pot of styles, policies, and techniques, Vietnamese communist propaganda manages somehow to be culturally specific, politically correct, and universal, at the same time. This unique melange can only make us contemplate the constituency, malleability and mutability of propaganda and wonder at how it has evolved into the dark art of today.





# Chapter 2 The ever-evolving art of propaganda

“Better to conquer hearts than citadels.”<sup>1</sup>

Propaganda has had a long presence in human affairs. The term ‘propaganda’ was coined by the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth century, but the practice stretches back even further to antiquity when it was called rhetoric, the art of persuasion. Aristotle viewed persuasion as an essential function of rhetoric, while Plato saw it as an enemy of truth, and, therefore intellectually, and morally indefensible.<sup>2</sup> To this day, these two views, functionalist and moralist, remain at the core of the immense tension that propaganda creates. Definitions of propaganda are numerous, expansive, reductive, and elusive. For many, propaganda is a pack of lies; for others, it is a communication tool, “no more moral or immoral than a pump handle.”<sup>3</sup> Perspective is everything and what one person may consider ‘propaganda’, another may consider ‘truth’.

This chapter is a digression from the central topic of the cultural origins of Vietnamese revolutionary propaganda. It provides a historical overview of the concept of propaganda. I argue for a nuanced understanding of the concept, so as to remove bias when discussing the artefacts of propaganda, such as the DRV’s wartime political posters, which form part of the empirical content of this discussion.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of propaganda as a term, and, as a practice, its connection to visual communication, its evolution as a ‘dark art,’ and its application in Vietnam’s twentieth-century conflict era. The aim is to provide historical context and international perspective for this complex, multi-faceted, and often confronting communication practice.

Propaganda is the bedrock of this enquiry into the cultural origins of the visual communication produced and distributed by the DRV during the Indochina Wars of the twentieth century. Between 1945 and 1975, propaganda was essential in mobilising popular support for the military strategies of ‘People’s War’<sup>4</sup> and ‘Total War’<sup>5</sup> adopted and adapted by the Vietnamese communist leadership to wage war against adversaries who were militarily, financially and technologically superior.

<sup>1</sup> Nguyễn Trãi (1380–1442), a Confucian scholar, and noted poet writing under the name of Úc Trai.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Brown, “Two Ways of Looking at Propaganda,” (USC on Public Diplomacy, online): n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Lasswell, “The Function of the Propagandist,” *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1928): 264.

<sup>4</sup> Marxist military strategy first developed by Chinese communist revolutionary leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and adapted to Vietnam by Vietnamese general, Võ Nguyên Giáp (1911–2013). The basic concept is to enlist the support of the population while harassing the enemy through a mix of mobile and guerrilla warfare.

<sup>5</sup> Military conflict in which contenders will sacrifice lives and resources to obtain victory. Non-traditional combatants such as women, children and the elderly, are also mobilised to support and participate in the war effort.

## 2.1 Towards a definition of propaganda

Propaganda: few other words cause greater consternation. For many people, the word ‘propaganda’ is synonymous with manipulation, deception, coercion, and lies. However, as political scientist Nicholas O’Shaughnessy argues, “deception is not some essential essence of propaganda’s definition, but it is critical to the popular understanding of propaganda.”<sup>6</sup> The term has become a pejorative word that has the power to discredit information and its source as unreliable, untrue, or untrustworthy, even when it is not. Yesterday’s ‘propaganda’ is today’s ‘fake news,’ particularly, according to John Schumpeter, if it emanates “from a source we don’t like.”<sup>7</sup> It would seem that propaganda itself is in need of some positive propaganda.

Despite a chequered reputation, there is nothing new about propaganda. The concept and the practice are as old as Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric*, and as contested now as it was then.<sup>8</sup> The complexity and confronting nature of propaganda’s history makes the concept of propaganda challenging to define objectively. Anyone attempting to do so, as O’Shaughnessy has pointed out, is entering a conceptual minefield.<sup>9</sup>

Dr Joseph Goebbels, propaganda’s darkest practitioner, believed the term was misjudged and misunderstood: “The layman uses it to mean something inferior or even despicable. The word propaganda always has a bitter aftertaste.”<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding the irony in using Goebbels’ remarks to assist in the renovation of the word ‘propaganda’, this thesis contends that negative assumptions about propaganda should be challenged. As Edward Bernays, one of the other ‘forefathers’ of public relations, observed, “the only difference between propaganda and education, really, is in the point of view.”<sup>11</sup>

Amid the competing definitions of propaganda, communication scholars, Gareth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell steered the debate into neutral waters, when they devised the following widely received,<sup>12</sup> if not wholly accepted, formulation:

The deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> O’Shaughnessy, *Weapons of Mass Destruction*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, written in the fourth century BCE, is historically regarded as a masterwork on persuasion.

<sup>9</sup> O’Shaughnessy, *Weapons of Mass Destruction*, 14

<sup>10</sup> 1933 Speech by Josef Goebbels “Tasks of the Ministry of Propaganda,” in Anson Rabinach and Sander L. Gilman, *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2013), 456.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Bernays, *Crystallising Public Opinion*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1928), 212.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Ginsberg, *The art of influence: Asian propaganda*, (London: The British Museum Press, 2013), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Gareth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1986), 16.

Historian Philip M. Taylor also supports a neutral position: “propaganda is a practical process of persuasion and, as a practical process, it is an inherently neutral concept.”<sup>14</sup>

By focussing on the aspect of functionality, the similarities between propaganda and the practice of strategic communications, undertaken by corporations and non-commercial organisations around the globe, become startlingly clear. As defined by communication scholars, Derina Holtzhausen and Ansgar Zerfass, strategic communication is “the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals.”<sup>15</sup>

However, by focussing on the functional aspect of propaganda, it is possible to overlook or sidestep the emotional territory of propaganda’s almost mystical power that Goebbels outlined in a speech at the 1934 Nuremberg Rally:

It [propaganda] rises from the depths of the people and must always return to the people to find its roots and strength. It may be good to have power based on weapons. It is better and longer lasting, however, to win and hold the heart of a nation.<sup>16</sup>

Other scholars also discuss the mutuality of propaganda in ways that challenge the view that propaganda is imposed, external, or monologic. Sociologist Jacques Ellul asserts that propaganda is not wholly coercive, which he argues is expressed in the concept of ‘need’ as a “...a dual need: the need of regimes to make it; and the need of the propagandee” to receive it.”<sup>17</sup>

O’Shaughnessy too, asserts the collaborative process, adding that propaganda is also “a fantasy or a conspiracy we share,”<sup>18</sup> which can make some outcomes of propaganda morally ambiguous and contentious, such as the Nazi anti-Semitic campaigns. Simply put, the seeds of propaganda are in society to begin with, and therein lies its strength and power. Moreover, as communication scholar Maurice Tugwell observes, “propaganda which tries to oppose fundamental trends and attitudes in the society in which it acts is likely to fail.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Philip M. Taylor, “Propaganda from Thucydides to Thatcher: Some Problems, Perspectives & Pitfalls,” (Lecture paper, University of Leeds, 1992): n.p.

<sup>15</sup> Derina Holtzhausen and Ansgar Zerfass. “Strategic Communication – Pillars and Perspectives of an Alternative Paradigm,” in A. Zerfaß, L. Rademacher, and Wehmeier S. (eds), *Organisationskommunikation und Public Relations*, (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013), 74.

<sup>16</sup> Speech by Joseph Goebbels at 1934 Nuremberg Rally. *Der Kongress zur Nürnberg 1934*. (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP., Frz. Eher Nachf., 1934), 130-141.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 121.

<sup>18</sup> O’Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Maurice Tugwell, “Understanding Propaganda,” *Journal of Communication Studies*, London: Routledge (1981): 13.

## 2.2 An historical overview of propaganda

An overview of propaganda's history shows that the concept, if not the term, has been part of societies for a very long time, and, is remarkably adaptable to circumstance, with the ability to take most, if not all, forms of communication – speech, text, literature, graphics, symbols, moving images, still images, spectacle, architecture, and art – depending on the target audience and technological circumstances, to communicate the message.

One of the earliest extant instances viewed by historians as propaganda is the Behistun Inscription (c. 515 BCE), a large bas-relief carved into the rock face of Mount Behistun in north-western Iran.<sup>20</sup> In three languages,<sup>21</sup> the inscription proclaims the ascendancy and legitimacy of Darius the Great (522–486 BCE) to the Persian throne. Accompanied by a life-size image of Darius I, the 15-metre-high by 25-metre-wide inscription announces he has been victorious in battle by subduing multiple rebellions instigated by impostors and collaborators.<sup>22</sup> The massive carving maximises the message by visual impact through its scale, engineering feat, and position (see Figure 9).



**Figure 9** Photograph showing the Behistun Inscription (detail), c. 515 BCE, Bas-relief, Mt. Behistun, Iran, courtesy of the photographer Babek Trafreshi.

The imposing monument is situated 100 metres above ground level overlooking an ancient caravanserai, a resting station on the Royal Road, which facilitated communications and connected the vast Persian empire with trade routes between Europe and Asia, widely referred to as the Silk Road (see Figure 10). The public location, the triumphalism of the message, and

<sup>20</sup> Brendan D. Nagle, and Stanley M. Burstein, *The Ancient World: Readings in Social and Cultural History*, (Pearson Education 2009), 133.

<sup>21</sup> The inscription is in three ancient languages, Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian, written in cuneiform script.

<sup>22</sup> Herbert Cushing Tolman, trans., *The Behistun Inscription of King Darius*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1908), n.p.

humiliation of ‘the enemy’ are all hallmarks of propaganda construction across the ages, right through to the twentieth century Vietnamese propaganda posters discussed in this thesis.



**Figure 10 Photograph of the Behistun Inscription overlooking the town of Kermanshah, Kermanshah Province, Iran, courtesy of Kochar Tours, Iran.**

Visual propaganda has come in all shapes and sizes, from the Behistun monument to a postage stamp, from the Eiffel Tower or the temple complex of Angkor Wat to a paper poster. Visual communication theory asserts that complex ideas can be communicated “memorably and perhaps more effectively” through visual means to dynamic and lasting effect.<sup>23</sup> In other words, it encapsulates the well-known adage, “a picture is worth a thousand words”. The images created or appropriated are recognisable, symbolic, and iconic, and they are delivered in a public space to be consumed by the target audience.

Over the millennia, ‘propaganda’ has been closely, but not exclusively, associated with information campaigns and materials produced by centralised governments to assert their legitimacy and authority, and, to mobilise population support for their policies and programmes. However, non-government entities, including business companies, activist groups, individuals, and religious organisations, have also been involved in the production of propaganda. Technology has added to the modes of delivery, especially in print technology, but has not necessarily displaced older forms. Images of rulers, such as emperors, tsars, kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers, have long been glorified on the currency of the realm, and part of people’s daily lives. Furthermore, though ideologies may change, the essential content of the messages may stay more or the less the same. For example, in fourth-century China, Imperial

<sup>23</sup> Jan Stuart in Ginsberg, *The art of influence*, 7.

court painting praised and encouraged selflessness and bravery as Maoist posters would 1500 years later.<sup>24</sup>

In 1622, Pope Gregory XV convened the *Sacra Congregatio di propagare fide* (Congregation for Propagating the Faith), a ‘curia’, or council of cardinals, ordered ‘to spread’ [*propagare*] the Catholic faith to counter the Protestant Reformation, and especially the activities and ‘propaganda’ of Protestant missionaries in non-Catholic and non-European countries.<sup>25</sup> The mission to spread Christianity had long been a part of European exploration and expansionism. Indeed, Christopher Columbus’ expeditions in the 1490s had been funded by the Catholic monarchs of Spain<sup>26</sup> in part to spread Christianity. European colonialism was an ideal vector for the Christian apostolic missionary movement, which followed doctrinal and territorial lines. From the early 1600s, waves of missionaries were sent to the Catholic empires of Spain, Portugal and France, while Protestant missionaries found the ever-growing British Empire an ideal fit. ‘Spreading the word’ and ‘saving souls’ were intertwined in the rise of imperialism.

Lasswell observed that “the only effective weapon against propaganda on behalf of one policy seems to be propaganda on behalf of an alternative.”<sup>27</sup> This points to the inherent duality in propaganda as a device to advocate or reject, and, to maintain or protest. Often seen as advancing a cause, propaganda can equally defend a position in order to counteract or resist, an opposing one. Inevitably the word ‘propaganda’, as initiated by Rome, took on a negative connotation in Protestant domains while remaining positive in Catholic spheres. To this day, in countries using Latin languages, ‘propaganda’ simply means advertising.<sup>28</sup> Not that there is anything simple in the modern practices of advertising or public relations,<sup>29</sup> which like propaganda, position ideas (and products) in the public mind with the aim to shape the perception of an organisation, person or brand, and to invite a response or make a call for action.

The nineteenth century saw the term ‘propaganda’ being used more frequently in a secular, particularly political, manner to promote the claims of ethno-nationalist groups chafing under historical dispossession or the homogenising effects of empires, such as Tsarist naturalisation policies of Russification,<sup>30</sup> or Westminster’s cultural imperialism, such as the school program to anglicise the Welsh language, known as “Welsh Not.”<sup>31</sup> Inevitably, some groups advocated violence against the State through political acts known as Propaganda of the Deed.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Diggs-Brown, *Strategic Public Relations: an audience-focussed practice*, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 2011), 48.

<sup>26</sup> Queen Isabella I of Castile (1454–1501) and King Ferdinand of Aragon (1469–1504).

<sup>27</sup> Lasswell, “The Function of the Propagandist,” 260-261.

<sup>28</sup> O’Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Some scholars contend that ‘public relations’ is euphemistic term for propaganda.

<sup>30</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Nikolas Coupland, *English in Wales: Diversity, Conflict and Change*, (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1990), 2-3.

## 2.3 Propaganda of the Deed

Proponents of Propaganda of the Deed sought to inspire the masses, and, to be the catalyst for revolution by sanctioning political violence for its symbolic and publicity value. In 1870, Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, argued that “we must spread our principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda.”<sup>32</sup> However, German anarchist, Johann Most stressed that it was the promotional value of the action that was paramount: “What is important is not solely these actions themselves but also the propagandistic effect they are able to achieve.”<sup>33</sup>

Anarchists and revolutionary groups rationalised violence for its propaganda value and as a justified response to State oppression. Regicide was considered the highest manifestation of political action, but all representatives, functionaries, supporters and civilians of the State were potential targets.<sup>34</sup> Secret societies and underground groups undertook violent actions, such as bombings of public spaces or targeted assassinations, or both, as in the case of the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 and, Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914. The Tsar was assassinated by university students, Nikolai Rysakov and Ignacy Hryniewiecki, both members of the revolutionary of *Narodnaya Volya* [People’s Will].<sup>35</sup> The assassination of the Archduke by 19-year-old Gavrilo Princep and other young school students of Young Bosnia, brought global attention and triggered the First World War.<sup>36</sup>

In 1924, Vietnamese resentment towards the French colonial administration for failing to “carry out their civilising mission” in Indochina exploded - literally.<sup>37</sup> On June 19, in Canton (Guangzhou), a Vietnamese revolutionary, Phạm Hồng Thái (c. 1895 – 1924) threw a bomb at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Governor-General of French Indochina, Martial Merlin (1860–1935) during an official banquet in the international concession.<sup>38</sup> Five people died and dozens were injured, but Merlin survived the attack. Phạm Hồng Thái died trying to escape but gained eternal life as a martyr of the revolution. His dramatic, highly visible action failed to kill the governor-general but succeeded in reigniting anti-colonial sentiment and fanned the flames of Vietnamese militant nationalism.<sup>39</sup>

Propaganda of the Deed also had non-violent applications. The most famous instance is Mahatma Gandhi’s civil disobedience concept of non-cooperation, known as *satyagraha* [soul force], which challenged British rule first in South Africa in 1914, and then in India from 1915

<sup>32</sup> Bakunin, Mikhail, “Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis,” in *Bakunin on Anarchy*, (Marxist Archives), n.p.

<sup>33</sup> Johann Most, “Action as Propaganda,” *Freiheit*, (25 July 1885), (Marxist Archives), n.p.

<sup>34</sup> Kristy Kate Champion, “Under the Shadow of Swords: Propaganda of the Deed in the History of Terrorism,” (PhD diss., James Cook University, 2005), 1-2.

<sup>35</sup> People’s Will [*Narodnaya Volya*], a nineteenth-century Russian agrarian revolutionary group that advocated terrorism to destabilise the Russian Empire in order to promote reform.

<sup>36</sup> Young Bosnia, early 1900s revolutionary movement opposed to Austro-Hungarian rule. Formed to promote Yugoslavism and Pan-Serbism, members included Serbians, Bosniaks, and Muslims.

<sup>37</sup> William Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*, (McGraw Hill, 1995), 27.

<sup>38</sup> At the Victoria Hotel, international concession, Canton (Guangzhou), China.

<sup>39</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 66.

to 1947, when India became independent of Britain. The concept of *satyagraha* has been adopted by other protest movements around the world, such as Occupy Wall Street in 2011, which inspired similar social justice protests around the world. Through these deeds of civil disobedience or militant violence, Propaganda of the Deed achieved its propagandising effect by challenging the State's projection of power and cornering its response. Propaganda of the Deed succeeds by creating a 'no-win' situation for the State, which is made to look either weak or oppressive depending on its response.<sup>40</sup>

Calculated to inspire supporters and outrage opponents, violent early twentieth century 'propaganda of the deed' sowed the seeds of modern terrorism, and by association, attached violent extremism to the perception of propaganda. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001 is a deeply etched twenty-first century example that fulfilled all the objectives of Propaganda of the Deed. Extraordinary footage and images of the strike on the 'twin towers' were broadcast around the world, propagating the act of terror over and over again (see Figure 11).<sup>41</sup>



**Figure 11** Photograph of the second hijacked-plane approaching the South Tower of the World Trade Centre, New York, September 11, 2001, courtesy of photographer Seth McAllister.

<sup>40</sup> John Merriman, *The Dynamite Club: How a Bombing in Fin-de-Siècle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 63.

<sup>41</sup> Terence Lee and Christine Giles, "Discursive realities: Global media and September 11," *Australian Journal of Communication* 31, no 1 (2004): 37-55.



## 2.4 Mass media and global war

In the twentieth century, the development of the mass media amplified propaganda's persuasive effects and reach. The two world wars provided the impetus for propaganda's rapid development and refinement, and a reputational fall from grace. The global nature of the First World War saw the first instance of large-scale organised propaganda campaigns by warring governments. Imperial governments used propaganda throughout their empires to secure population approval, support and involvement in the war effort. However, the unprecedented scale of violence of the First World War (1914–1918) shattered the pre-war ideals of the *Belle Époque*.<sup>42</sup> Widespread post-war disillusionment saw the loss of belief in the patriotic idealism and the morality of war and the rejection of institutions that had used increasingly manipulative methods of propaganda to sponsor those values. By 1928, American political scientist Harold Lasswell observed that the term propaganda had become “an epithet of contempt and hate, and the propagandists have sought protective coloration in such names as ‘public relations council’, ‘specialist in public education’, and ‘public relations adviser’.”<sup>43</sup>

According to Josef Goebbels and other right-wing German leaders, Germany lost the First World War because superior British propaganda, techniques (including leaflet drops of exaggerated and fabricated German atrocity stories) had damaged German civilian morale.<sup>44</sup> In his role as Reichminister for Propaganda and Public Enlightenment for the Nazi regime, Goebbels studied, adopted and developed British techniques to promote and enable Nazi ideology, policies, and programmes<sup>45</sup>. The full extent of the campaigns became known after the Nazi regime was defeated. The most infamous was the genocidal programme, euphemistically entitled the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question,” which brought about the death of six million European Jews and other demonised groups. The association with Nazi atrocities and aggression resulting in the global social catastrophe of the Second World War brought the word ‘propaganda’ everlasting opprobrium.

In the wake of WWII, all propaganda associated with totalitarian regimes that had perfected its techniques (fascist Italy and Germany, militarist Japan, communist Russia and China) would be condemned as deceptive, manipulative and deadly. George Orwell's dystopic novels of the 1940s<sup>46</sup> and their enduring critique of totalitarian propaganda, and, the paranoia of international communism during the Cold War, played ongoing roles in the development and perpetuation of the negative perception of propaganda in the public imagination.

<sup>42</sup> French for ‘beautiful era’, a Western historical period (1871–1914) led by France, characterised by optimism, regional peace, economic prosperity, and, scientific, technological, and cultural innovations.

<sup>43</sup> Lasswell, “The Function of the Propagandist,” 260.

<sup>44</sup> Josef P. Goebbels, Speech at Congress of Nuremberg 1934. In Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP., Frz. Eher Nachf., 1934, 130-141. In association with the ‘stab-in-the-back myth’ (*Dolchstoßlegende*), a notion that the German Army did not lose WWI on the battlefield but on the home front via civilian, particularly Jewish, betrayal; also used as a rationale for improving propaganda methods and controls.

<sup>45</sup> Ginsberg, *The art of influence*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> *Animal Farm: a fairy tale* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1947).

In the dying days of the Second World War, Vietnamese communist propaganda production accelerated in the lead up to Hồ Chí Minh's Declaration of Independence of Vietnam, within hours of the formal surrender of Japan, on September 2, 1945. Ahead of the arrival of the Allied forces in Indochina, posters and banners were erected in Saigon and Hanoi (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). The Việt Minh sought to persuade the Allies and France of the popularity and legitimacy of their right to govern an autonomous Vietnam.

As history shows, this Việt Minh public relations campaign failed. Eager to restore its shattered image as a world power after defeat and occupation during the Second World War, France was in no mood to relinquish colonial control in Indochina. The French refused to recognise the DRV as an independent nation, only as a 'free state' within the new French Union, which now combined all French overseas holdings with metropolitan France. Within weeks, French troops had overthrown the DRV administration in Saigon. Within the year, France reasserted colonial authority in Hanoi and declared war on the Việt Minh. The French controlled the urban centres but not rural Vietnam, which was home to over 90 percent of the Vietnamese population and the domain of the Việt Minh.<sup>47</sup>

## 2.5 Vietnamese communist propaganda

Vietnamese communist visual propaganda was designed to communicate with the vast agrarian majority of the population. According to historian Mark Bradley, this target group had been historically ignored by the spokespersons of anti-colonialism, who had usually courted a more urbanised and literate audience.<sup>48</sup> According to historian Christopher Goscha, Vietnamese leadership initially concentrated their propaganda efforts on building a united front. Later, after the conclusion of the First Indochina War, greater controls were exerted to indoctrinate the population with communist ideology.<sup>49</sup> While Vietnamese nationalism became increasingly radical and Leftist-leaning, the success of the initial unity strategy required the propaganda materials to articulate meaningful characteristics of national identity, including myths, traditions, customs and histories, in an understandable manner. These materials enabled the Việt Minh to communicate with a diverse population made up of approximately 54 ethnic groups, to persuade them to make common cause and support the revolutionary mission. In this campaign, the Viet Minh were entirely successful. As historian Marc Jason Gilbert asserts, "domestically, the DRV benefitted from the fullest support on the home front enjoyed by any nation at war in the modern period."<sup>50</sup>

Propaganda production was carried out by artists who had been trained in the aesthetics, philosophies, and traditions of Western classical art at the French academy, École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine (EBAI) [The Fine Arts School of Indochina] established in Hanoi twenty

<sup>47</sup> The 1937 census estimated that over 90 percent of the population (19 million) lived in rural communities, with over 90 percent illiteracy. David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920–1945*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1981), 5.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 365.

<sup>50</sup> Marc Jason Gilbert, *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 7.

years earlier.<sup>51</sup> This cohort of artists was adept in visual culture production, especially poster-making, and had at their fingertips a pedagogical modality that was highly useful to the DRV communication strategy. Cultural historian Kim Bao Ngoc Ninh asserts, “Painters in particular were greatly needed by the Viet Minh probably more so than other professions, painters understood intimately and intuitively the relationship between their work and the needs of the revolution.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, their expertise could be put to use immediately, providing almost instantaneous production of propaganda images and government emblems, and training the next generations in the lineage of Vietnamese visual communication.

Closed during the Japanese occupation, the EBAI was reconstituted as *Khóa Kháng Chiến* [*Resistance Class*] in the Việt Minh friendly jungle mountains of the Việt Bắc until after the First Indochina War.<sup>53</sup> Artists were trained in the principles and techniques of propaganda art production, western fine arts curricula, and Marxist doctrine.

Artists were organised into ‘agitprop’<sup>54</sup> units called *Văn nghệ* [Art], which also included actors and singers, and were assigned to army corps and given rank. The ‘art units’ were mobile and often travelled with military units to document soldiers at war as well as to engage with local populations, frequently in contested areas to encourage support for the DRV war effort. In a country that was largely pre-literate, pre-broadcast, and unnavigable due to mountains and jungles, the mobile agitprop units were an innovative ‘low-tech’ solution to a significant communication management distribution problem.

Though it is difficult to quantify the impact of the visual propaganda on individuals and communities, it is possible to point to the success of specific campaigns, such as the recruitment of civilians, particularly women, for militia units protecting cities or ports, and, for auxiliary units facilitating supplies and materiel to the battlefield, such as Điện Biên Phủ, or via the Hồ Chí Minh Trail to the southern warzones.<sup>55</sup> Goscha estimates two million people participated in the DRV civilian militia, 50 percent of them women, during the First Indochina War; approximately, ten percent of the total population at the time.<sup>56</sup>

As a principal channel of communication between the DRV and its sovereign people, the propaganda posters were integrally involved in the formation of the nation, and, national identity. DRV propaganda posters shaped public understanding of who were, and, what it meant to be Vietnamese. By imagining a better future and reimagining a glorious past, the posters simultaneously shaped and reflected the aspirations of Vietnamese society in the present. The

<sup>51</sup> Phoebe Scott, “Forming and reforming the artist: modernity, agency and the discourse of art in North Vietnam, 1925–1954,” (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2014), 2.

<sup>52</sup> Kim Bao Ngoc Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam 1945–1965*, (2002), 136.

<sup>53</sup> After the war, the school returned to Hanoi, and, in 1957 was renamed Hanoi College of Fine Arts. In 1981, the school was elevated to the Vietnam University of Fine Arts.

<sup>54</sup> Shortened from *Agitacionnopropropagandistskij otdel* [Agitation-Propaganda Section], *agitprop* is political propaganda, especially communist, promulgated chiefly in literature, drama, music, or art.

<sup>55</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 330.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 330-1.

surviving DRV propaganda materials, chiefly war posters, are the legacy of that dynamic process, which continues to resonate across contemporary Vietnamese society.

As a subject of study, these cultural objects offer invaluable insights into the process of Vietnamese nation-building, social cohesion and national identity during times of national emergency. We have much to learn from these artful messages from the past that only in retrospect reveal how propaganda can serve to shape popular opinion and, ultimately, a nation's destiny.

In conclusion, history reveals that propaganda has been present in the discourse between governments and the governed for a very long time. Propaganda has been involved in the assertion of legitimacy, power, dominion, religious zeal, and ideological fanaticism. Propaganda has also been involved in the prosecution of war and the persecution of people. Disagreements about the nature of propaganda have not and may never be resolved. Nor perhaps should they, as they serve to remind us of the complexity and ambivalence of the ever-evolving art of propaganda communication. For all its forms, formulations, and, transformations, however, it could be said, in the manner of the famous phrase by French writer, Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr (1808–1890) – *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* – the more that propaganda changes, the more it stays the same.

Perhaps it is time to acknowledge the equivocal within propaganda, while at the same time look beyond dichotomies, such as right and wrong, good and evil, to recognise that propaganda inhabits the hinterland of perception, a native of the liminal that illuminates as much as it obscures: a *chiaroscuro* of communication management.<sup>57</sup>

Vietnamese revolutionary propaganda did not just happen or exist in a vacuum, as will be discussed in the next chapter. It was a strategic, artful, evolving response to a French enterprise, shaped by imperial ambition, that attempted to bolster legitimacy through a unique style of colonial propaganda – *mission civilisatrice* – a self-appointed and almost messianic mission to civilise.

<sup>57</sup> Italian art term referring to the treatment of light and shade in drawing and painting, which heightens emotional effect through contrast.

# Chapter 3 Illusion, disillusion and delusion in Indochina

“Colonisation is legitimate. It is beneficial.”<sup>1</sup>

At the apex of its colonial empire, France hosted an international spectacular, L'Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris 1931, a colonial exhibition that celebrated the achievements of European colonialism, and, the ascendancy of the French colonial mission. Designed to dazzle the metropole, to boost investment and trade, and, to bolster French and international public opinion for the colonial enterprise, the six-month-long exhibition attracted over 33 million visitors.<sup>2</sup> Covering 110 hectares of land, the scale of the colonial exhibition was vast and monumental. A series of pavilions featured lavish displays from Europe's colonial powers. Towering above all was the Palais de l'Indochine, a showcase for the brightest star in the French colonial firmament – Indochine Française, literally French Indochina – in a life-size reconstruction, costing 12.5 million Francs, of the famous temple complex of Angkor Wat (see Figure 12).<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 12 Adolphe Braun et Cie, postcard showing the exterior view of the Palais de l'Indochine, Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris 1931.**

As host, France took centre stage and outshone the other invited colonial powers, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Portugal, The Netherlands, and relative newcomer, the United States of America. Invited but notably absent was the world's largest empire, Britain, which had declined

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Olivier (c. 1880 – c. 1940), French military general and colonial administrator; Governor-General of Madagascar (1920–1930).

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Morton, “National and Colonial: The Musée des Colonies at the Colonial Exposition, Paris, 1931,” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 80, no. 2 (1998): 357-377.

<sup>3</sup> Panivong Norindr, “Representing Indochina: the French colonial fantasmatic and the Exposition Coloniale de Paris,” *French Cultural Studies* 6, no.16 (1995): 47.

to join in the imperial jamboree, perhaps stereotypically lacking enthusiasm for the French colonial project, but also the funds due to the staging of its own imperial extravaganza in London a few years earlier.<sup>4</sup>

Described as “a resume of all that which old Europe has made in the universe” and a “rallying centre for all the peoples who love the French genius and its manifestations across the World,”<sup>5</sup> the 1931 Paris International Colonial Exposition was a peak expression of imperial ideology, colonial propaganda, and, France’s special obsession with the civilising mission of ‘enlightening’ non-Western peoples. The Exposition’s commemorative publications,<sup>6</sup> echoed the mantra of the civilising mission, “Colonization is legitimate. It is beneficial.”<sup>7</sup>

In reality, France’s civilising mission was an illusion, a ‘myth of colonialism’, and the 1931 Exposition a glittering hall of smoke and mirrors, which attempted to disguise the harsh reality of colonial rule from the colonisers as much as the colonised. A year before in Indochina, there been a serious rebellion in the colonial military at Yên Bái, and, more recently, a violent protest strike by workers on the Michelin Rubber Plantation at Phú Riềng. As the decade darkened with the global economic and political crises of the 1930s, the tenuous legitimacy of the colonial regime, and, the noble ideals of the civilising mission would be torn apart.

This chapter discusses the French civilising mission and its propagandistic effects, as well as its unintended consequences, whereby French colonial cultural ethos in Indochina facilitated the ‘tools’ for the Vietnamese revolutionary visual communication. Under the auspice of a civilising mission, the French colonial regime implemented educational reform with all the fanfare of indigenous improvement but with the ulterior intent to secure the colony by fostering indigenous dependence on French benevolence. Ultimately these reforms had unintended and perverse effects by providing the key elements that would facilitate the production of anti-colonial propaganda that was instrumental in mobilising the indigenous population to overthrow the colonial regime.

The chapter begins with discussions about the French civilising mission, followed by the resurgence of French imperialism in the nineteenth century, and France’s emerging role as a major power in East Asia. Then it discusses the establishment of Indochina and the growing dependence of France on its colony. It then discusses some of the measures and reforms, France introduced to develop binding ties that would foster the colony’s dependence on France, and, ensure regime security, in particular, the educational reforms of literacy and the fine arts, which are the key elements of Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>4</sup> British Empire Exhibition 1924-25.

<sup>5</sup> Morton, “National and Colonial,” 357-377.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>7</sup> *Le Livre d’Or de l’Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris 1931*; and the nine-volume *Rapport général de l’Exposition Coloniale Internationale*.

### 3.1 The civilising mission and the colonial moment

Like many European colonial powers, France justified the domination of other countries by the notion that colonisation was a civilising mission destined to bring the benefits of the Enlightenment to non-western indigenous peoples. The term ‘civilisation’ was first used by the French in the eighteenth century to describe the progress of humanity as a whole, and, as an antonym to barbarism.<sup>8</sup> The French civilising mission (*mission civilisatrice*) is predicated on a fundamental assumption of the superiority of European civilisation in general and the French form of it in particular. For the proponents of *mission civilisatrice*, the legacies of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, such as rationalism and universalism, as well as French advances in science (especially medicine), the arts, and finance, made France the leading civilisation, and mandated a moral responsibility to bring French civilisation to the world.

However, the lofty precepts of *mission civilisatrice* were really, as Goscha puts it, “a hodgepodge of nineteenth-century racialist theories” and selective elements of Social Darwinism<sup>9</sup> that enabled French republicans to reconcile or fudge their democratic values, particularly those enshrined in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,<sup>10</sup> with the aggressive imperialism of the era. According to historian Alice Conklin, France was the only colonial power to raise the civilising mission to the level of official imperial ideology.<sup>11</sup> Imbued with the noble ideals of the French Revolution, the famous tripartite motto – “Liberté, Fraternité, Egalité” – the republican vision of the civilising mission failed to recognise any inherent tension between the notions of forcible acquisition of empire and democratic freedom.<sup>12</sup> Historian, Nguyen Van Trung takes a trenchant view, asserting that *mission civilisatrice* was a “myth of colonialism,” designed to mask French exploitation:

The nature of colonialism was exploitation, oppression and obscurantism, but the myth was association and enlightenment. In order to set up a myth, there must be some realisation of part of the myth [...] just enough to fool people.<sup>13</sup>

In France, the colonial lobby had showcased *mission civilisatrice* in public spectacles designed to mobilise domestic public support for the imperial enterprise and to offset international criticism. In Indochina, for some in the colonial administration, *mission civilisatrice* was a genuine enterprise. For others, it was a smokescreen for the hand in glove operation of government and commerce.

<sup>8</sup> Alice L. Conklin, *The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 61.

<sup>9</sup> A self-serving nineteenth-century theory that applied Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection to sociology and politics to justify conservative, racist, and imperialist concepts and policies.

<sup>10</sup> Human civil rights document of the French Revolution, *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen 1789*.

<sup>11</sup> Conklin, *The Republican Idea*, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 68.

<sup>13</sup> Nguyễn Văn Trung, *French Colonialism in Vietnam: Reality and Myths*, (Saigon: Nam Sơn, 1963), 261, quoted in Huynh Boi Tran, “Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 Onwards,” (PhD diss., University of Sydney 2005), 75.

Initially, *mission civilisatrice* was blinding through its lofty but illusory promises, but in time, the failure by colonial authorities to implement genuine lasting promises stimulated nationalist sentiment creating a volatile political tinderbox. As attitudes hardened on both sides of the colonial divide, it was clear that the ‘mother country’ needed its colonial child far more than the other way around. Ultimately, the benefits of the much-vaunted *mission civilisatrice* would be turned by the colonised against the coloniser. It was an outcome that was an entirely unintended consequence of French colonial policy and an entirely unpleasant one at that.

### 3.2 The Second French Colonial Empire

Having lost its first colonial empire<sup>14</sup> to Britain during a prolonged era of conflict culminating on the battlefield of Waterloo in 1815, a smouldering nationalistic fervour, envy and rivalry fuelled much of France’s renewed imperialism in the nineteenth century. Initially, however, turbulent domestic politics reignited the imperial flame. In an attempt to distract a hostile French public with an expedient military victory in a foreign war, King Charles X (1787–1836), the second and most unpopular of the restored Bourbon monarchs, ordered the French Navy to seize Algiers in July 1830 from an ailing Ottoman Empire. The intervention did little for the reputation of the monarch, who was deposed shortly after in the July Revolution,<sup>15</sup> but it began the Conquest of Algeria (1830–1847) and laid the foundations of the second French colonial empire.

Immediately, strategic and material benefits flowed from this instance of French naval imperialism, including the elimination of the Barbary Coast pirates, who had disrupted and enslaved European settlement and trade for centuries, and a mitigation of British naval dominance in the Mediterranean. In time, French Algeria would become home to a million French settlers, and the springboard for French dominance of North, West, and Central Africa, during the ‘Scramble for Africa’, when European powers vied with each other for control of the continent in the late nineteenth century. The confluence of strategic, economic, and reputational benefits and effects provided by France’s Algerian sortie would illuminate the imperial path to ‘glory in the future.

Similar concerns over trade security and British dominance motivated French aggression in Southeast Asia. In 1858, Napoleon III<sup>16</sup> ordered a naval attack on the ancient port of Đà Nẵng in southern Vietnam to establish a naval base and staging post to secure a French trade route to

<sup>14</sup> French First colonial empire (1534–1814), included New France (Canada and Louisiana), French West Indies, French Guiana, Senegal, Mauritius, Réunion, and French India.

<sup>15</sup> The Second French Revolution, known as the July Revolution, lasted three days from July 27-29, and created a constitutional monarchy in place of the hereditary system. Eugene Delacroix’s painting *Liberty Leading the People* (referred to in Chapter 4), is an allegory of the July Revolution.

<sup>16</sup> Charles-Louis Napoléon Bonaparte (1808–1873), nephew of Napoléon Bonaparte, proclaimed himself Emperor of the French (1852–1870) following a term as the first President (1848–1852) of the Second Republic.



China, which would circumvent the need to rely on the goodwill of British, who controlled the sea lanes to China via Singapore and Hong Kong. Moreover, there were tantalising possibilities that Saigon and Danang could be French versions of those British strongholds,<sup>17</sup> or, that the Mekong River might be an alternative and “independent route to the Chinese Eldorado.”<sup>18</sup> If the Indian subcontinent was Britain’s ‘jewel in the crown’, then Indochina was to be France’s ‘*Perle de l’Extrême-Orient* [Pearl of the Orient], a territorialised region one and a half times larger than the homeland.

French expansion in Vietnam was halted by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian<sup>19</sup> War (1870–1871).<sup>20</sup> However, the disastrous and humiliating defeat inflicted by Germany became a spur to further French overseas expansion. Curtailed in continental Europe, burdened with war reparations, and, suffering the loss of resource-rich Alsace-Lorraine, it was now imperative for France to find new markets, resources, and status overseas. It seemed that only a renewed colonial empire could provide the new markets and the natural and human resources required by emerging French manufacturing and financial sectors. Setting aside public indifference and even hostility towards the concept of empire and its practical costs, political leaders from all sides of the new Third French Republic endorsed colonial expansion as the path to French glory and security.<sup>21</sup> This was a way to make France great again while at the same time contain the German threat abroad. Already with a head start, in the coming decades France would extend its holdings in Africa creating an east-west axis from Morocco to Egypt, and in Asia establish French Indochina out of the annexation of three Southeast Asian kingdoms.

Bit by bit, France ‘conquered’ Vietnam between 1873 and 1885, pummelling Vietnamese resistance and seizing provinces from the ruling Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945) in violent and invariably asymmetrical confrontations.<sup>22</sup> By 1887, so much territory was gained, France established the colonial state, officially known as the Indochinese Union, and consolidated power by creating three separate jurisdictions (Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina) and incorporating them along with Cambodia in 1887, and, Laos in 1893, into Indochine Française (see Appendix C, a map of the colony c. 1921). By the end of the nineteenth century, *La plus grande France* was a major player in the new wave of European colonial expansion, which would come to dominate 84 percent of the globe. Whereas Germany, a slow starter in the imperial game, would lose everything in the aftermath of the Great War (1914–1918), much to France’s deep revanchist satisfaction.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly, *Indochina: an ambiguous colonisation 1858–1954*, (Berkeley, L.A. Calif.,: University of California Press, 2009), 14.

<sup>18</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 64.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Alice L. Conklin, *The Republican Idea*, 60.

<sup>21</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Norman G. Owen (ed), *The Emergence of Southeast Asia: A New History*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 336.

### 3.3 *Indochine: colonie d'exploitation économique*

The business of running this vast and distant colonial holding of 20 million people was overseen by a minuscule fraction of French colonial administrators, who had no intention of ruling this far-flung part of empire alone. The fact is the French required the cooperation of the Vietnamese to do so. Their solution was to graft French forms of governance onto traditional Vietnamese political structures. The roles of mandarins in the provinces and the emperor in the imperial capital of Hué were preserved with a French Governor-General as overlord in Hanoi, a post that would see numerous 'vice regal' incumbents act with more power than the emperor. The Empire of Annam existed in name only. Nevertheless, the indigenous population used it, referring to themselves as *ngoi Annam* [Annamite people].<sup>23</sup>

France pursued at times paradoxical administrative and cultural policies in Indochina. The differing politics and personalities of the numerous governors-general may have contributed to the see-saw effect.<sup>24</sup> Initially, the policy of assimilation held sway, largely in the French imagination, but also as a tool for leveraging indigenous cooperation and collaboration. Derived from the egalitarian precepts of the French revolution, assimilation suggested that in exchange for adopting Western and French modes of behaviours, such as language and dress, indigenous subjects could become citizens of France.<sup>25</sup> In reality, comparatively few indigenous peoples were accorded French citizenship. By First World War's end, the policy was on the wane and the policy of association, whereby local culture and institutions existed alongside French culture, was advanced.<sup>26</sup> However, the policy of association like assimilation was predicated on the supremacy of French civilisation, and in reality, any indigenous advances were limited by colonial controls, which would lead to growing nationalist dissatisfaction and resentment.

The colonial state walked a thin line between pacifying nationalist elements in the indigenous community and mollifying the *colons* (settlers) displeasure over native improvement or advancement. To the French settler, who often or not viewed the colonial administration as a financial drain,<sup>27</sup> any social measures, such as cultural institutions and educational facilities were seen as unnecessary and costly diversions from Indochina's true potential as a site for full-scale economic development. After all, Indochina was designated a *colonie d'exploitation économique* [colony of economic development] and not a *colonie de peuplement* [colony for settlement].<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Truong Buu Lam, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900–1931*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>24</sup> From 1887 to 1945, France sent over thirty 'viceroys' to Indochina, some of them twice.

<sup>25</sup> Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890–1914*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Brocheux and Hémerly, *Indochina*, 189.

<sup>28</sup> Betts, *Assimilation*, 27. Unlike Algeria, which, as a *colonie de peuplement* [colony for settlement], had over a million settlers, French Indochina only reached 36,000 settlers, many of whom were involved in the administration and the military.

Once the colonial state was established in 1887, the French set about transforming the feudal agrarian economy into a modern capitalist enterprise, centred on Saigon and the great Mekong Delta rice paddies in the south.<sup>29</sup> The first phase of the civilising mission, *mise en valeur* [developing value]<sup>30</sup> saw a massive investment in the colony's physical resources, such as roads, canals, bridges, docks, plantations and mines. The economic, as well as the bureaucratic transformation, was immense; as was the expense, and as the new century approached the colony plunged into stifling debt.<sup>31</sup>

Sent out to turn the colony around in 1897, economic hard-liner Paul Doumer, Governor-General of Indochina, (1897–1902) reorganized the state's finances. Over the next five years, Doumer laid down the foundations and framework which were to characterise Indochina for the next four decades.<sup>32</sup> Doumer's fiscal policies transformed Indochina into an economic powerhouse able to repay debt and to remit massive contributions to the French metropolitan budget, and a vast flow of resources. However, Doumer's economic 'miracle' was based on the imposition of forced labour (*corvée*)<sup>33</sup> and a new agrarian capitalism that included individual and land taxes, which accelerated the extraction of cash from the peasant economy.

Taxation, monopoly, and market mechanisms soon worked relentlessly against the interests of peasants whose output had previously met the more diverse needs of an autonomous economy.<sup>34</sup> State monopolies were created to control the production and distribution of consumables, such as salt, alcohol, and opium. Consumption taxes were initiated and increased dramatically and remorselessly. Between 1897 and 1906, the tax on salt rose over 2,712 percent.<sup>35</sup> Consumption quotas were imposed on every village making restraint or avoidance impossible.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, all taxes had to be paid in hard cash, that is, in the currency of the realm, the Indochine silver piastre, putting peasants at the mercy of the "marked-up rates of exchange from money lenders or landlords."<sup>37</sup> Penurious tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and labourers had little option but to borrow at usurious rates of interest that ensured they remained in a never-ending cycle of debt. Millions of subsistence farmers now had to sell their labour to subsist. The consequence was a vast underclass of destitute, itinerant and landless peasants, who ended up working for French-owned plantations on land that they once may have called, or thought of, as their own.

<sup>29</sup> Brocheux and Hémary, *Indochina*, 120.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>32</sup> David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920–1945*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Introduced in 1901, the *corvée* required male peasants of adult age to complete 30 days of unpaid work on government works.

<sup>34</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Brocheux and Hémary, *Indochina*, 93.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>37</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 5.

In a speech to the French parliament in 1911, leading Republican politician Jean Jaurès<sup>38</sup> prophesied disaster:

The natives whose taxes you doubled, tripled, and quintupled, whose resources and hope you devoured on a daily basis [...] if we carry on, we reap nothing from these lands but hatred and disappointment.<sup>39</sup>

Despite, Jaurès' warning, during the First World War (1914–1918) Indochina was pressed to supply a staggering 60 percent of the entire colonial financial contribution to the 'mother country', along with 340,000 tons of raw materials, and 100,000 Indochinese soldiers and volunteers to the Western Front.<sup>40</sup> Indochinese support for the war effort had been secured through colonial propaganda that offered promises, concessions and policies for indigenous cooperation. Going in to the 1920s, many Vietnamese anticipated a brighter and better future, with good reason.

Following the war, large amounts of capital became available to develop plantation estates in Indochina. However, much of that investment went to French enterprise. By 1930 in Cochinchina, more than ninety percent of the 28 rubber plantations were French-owned (see Appendix D), such as the 5,500-hectare rubber plantation at Phú Riềng owned by French tyre manufacturer, Michelin,<sup>41</sup> and worked by a vast cohort of landless peasants in deplorable conditions,<sup>42</sup> described in eye-witness accounts as "hells on earth."<sup>43</sup> Many had been tricked into servitude. Desertion and death rates were shockingly high, with statistics, ironically verified by colonial authorities.<sup>44</sup> Voices accusing France of exploitation began to grow louder from critics at home and abroad.<sup>45</sup> As the Great Depression rolled-out and global conditions worsened, the colonial administration was wedged uncomfortably between *colon* and native demands. The era's economic and political instability made for erratic and arbitrary government as it careened from 'teacher' one moment to gendarme the next.

<sup>38</sup> Jean Jaurès (1859–1914), French socialist leader, anti-militarist, assassinated at the start of WWI.

<sup>39</sup> Brocheux and Hémary, *Indochina*, 376.

<sup>40</sup> Patrice Morlat, "Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression (Indochina)," (International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 2017), n.p.

<sup>41</sup> Compagnie Générale des Établissements Michelin, founded in 1888 to manufacture tyres for bicycles and horse-drawn carriages, was in a few years supplying the rapidly expanding automobile industry.

<sup>42</sup> Estimated to be over 50% of the rural population, Ronald J. Cima (ed), *Vietnam: A Country Study*, (Library of Congress, 1989), 33.

<sup>43</sup> For a searing Vietnamese eye-witness account, see Tran Tu Binh, *The Red Earth: a Vietnamese memoir of life on a colonial rubber plantation*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press), 1985.

<sup>44</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> J.P. Daughton, "Behind the Imperial Curtain: International Humanitarian Efforts and the Critique of French Colonialism in the Interwar Years," *French Historical Studies* 34, no. 3 (2012): 503-528.

### 3.4 Colonial culture, reform and regime security

Colonial culture was always an official project intended to validate French rule and to bolster the civilising mission.<sup>46</sup> Cultural reform evolved as an internal and external propagandistic measure. The administration's motives for founding cultural institutions were rarely altruistic and invariably came with strings attached, designed to improve French positions, such as enhanced profits, regime security (including developing a Vietnamese bureaucratic class to run the colony and severing links to other cultures), and, projecting an international propagandistic image of a benevolent, harmonious, and successful society. According to Goscha, some educational facilities were founded to counteract Indochinese students being poached to other countries, especially Japan.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, institutions opened for indigenous benefit were closed at the first signs of indigenous discontent. The Indochinese University, for example, was opened in Hanoi in 1907 to combat indigenous nationalism and closed a year later when anti-tax riots broke out.<sup>48</sup> It remained closed for ten years.

French rule had intended to influence Vietnamese culture through a modernising process, not uncommon to other colonised countries. However, the French deliberately added the dimension of disrupting the palpable connection to Chinese culture that a millennium of Chinese imperial rule had introduced to Vietnamese civilisation. Chinese influences deeply influenced Vietnamese culture, including food, clothing, and language, and was visibly retained in the writing system which transcribed Vietnamese spoken word in Chinese ideograms or characters. Based on the classical Chinese characters, the written form of Vietnamese could only be read and written by an elite class of people, who had undergone the elaborate and exhaustive Confucian examination system. French authorities abolished examinations based on Confucian classics as an entry to state bureaucracies,<sup>49</sup> and restructured the colonial education system to promote the new script, *Quốc ngữ* and the French language.<sup>50</sup>

Created in the seventeenth century by Jesuit missionaries, *Quốc ngữ* was revived by the colonial regime for political reasons to increase French engagement and influence. It would aid the teaching of French as a second language to facilitate bureaucratic administration. Moreover, it would reinforce regime security by severing Chinese traditional and radical influences. French authorities had become alarmed by the infiltration of undesirable nationalist and reformist ideas from the writings of Chinese revolutionaries such as Dr Sun Yat Sen (1866–1925), or indeed, their own in Chinese translation, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1788).<sup>51</sup> *Quốc ngữ* was not only easier to teach and to learn than the former system. According to historian Hoàng Văn Chí, the Romanised Vietnamese written language required just a month's study for an adult

<sup>46</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 361.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>48</sup> Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 221.

<sup>49</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 125.

<sup>50</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 343-6.

<sup>51</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 125; Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 237

Vietnamese to read and write.<sup>52</sup> The Romanised script was also cheaper to print than the comparatively elaborate Chinese characters, and the colonial regime invested in printing presses with the *Quốc ngữ* typeface.<sup>53</sup> Many of these *Quốc ngữ* printing presses were removed from Hanoi by the Việt Minh when they evacuated the city at the beginning of the First Indochina War.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the colonial regime invested in the printing of hundreds of thousands of educational primers, which exponentially accelerated the acculturation of the European-invented script of the Vietnamese spoken word. Unique in Asia, this mix of an Asian oral language and a European script resulting in the hybridised *Quốc ngữ* was seen by the Vietnamese as wholly and exceptionally Vietnamese. As Marr asserts, “Vietnam’s previously distinct oral and primary written modes of communication were thus united,” at last.<sup>55</sup> Unwittingly, the French administration had created a vector for Vietnamese national identity and the textual component for visual propaganda. According to Anderson, the French had unleashed a “medium to express Vietnamese culture and national solidarity.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, *Quốc ngữ* was exclusory of non-Vietnamese speakers, thereby reinforcing a “particular solidarity.” According to Goscha, it was a powerful communications tool “for disseminating new ideas and forms of social-political organisation.”<sup>57</sup> For the first time, elites and peasants could be on the same page, as it were, with a common language in a tangible and an accessible written form that everyone could speak, learn, read and share. Marr notes the surprising uptake of *Quốc ngữ* which enabled the DRV to conduct its affairs, communicate its policies, and promulgate its ideas to all its sovereign peoples during the First Indochina War.<sup>58</sup> A significant source of Vietnamese pride, on one hand, and of French infuriation on the other.

The colonial administration founded a small number of significant schools devoted to the visual arts designed to stimulate and commercialise indigenous artisanry. The founding of these educational facilities brought new or renewed impetus to local production, which had been sustained by royal patronage before French conquest. Huynh Boi Tran argues that these vocational schools were genuine in their benevolent mission, providing expert tuition, improved working conditions and “employment opportunities through the marriage between Vietnamese artistic endeavour and the French Academy [ . . . ] rather than colonial exploitation.”<sup>59</sup>

Applied arts schools had special areas of expertise that intended to develop local artisanal crafts, such as the woodwork and lacquerware school at Thủ Dầu Một established in 1901, and the ceramics and bronze casting school at Biên Hòa established in 1907. In 1913, the *École de Dessins* [School of Drawing] was established in Saigon to meet the growing demands of

<sup>52</sup> Văn Chí Hoàng, *From Colonialism to Communism*, (London: Pall Mall Press, 1964), 25.

<sup>53</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 346.

<sup>54</sup> David Heather and Sherry Buchanan, *Vietnam Posters: The David Heather Collection*. (Munich: Prestel, 2009), 6.

<sup>55</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 150.

<sup>56</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 128.

<sup>57</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 343.

<sup>58</sup> Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 150.

<sup>59</sup> Phoebe Scott, “Forming and reforming the artist: modernity, agency and the discourse of art in North Vietnam, 1925–1954,” (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2014), 7.

Vietnamese journalism and the press, accelerated by the introduction of French print technology and the Romanised language script *Quốc ngữ* [national script].<sup>60</sup> Like the others, this was a vocational school which set out to train students as craftsmen with courses that promoted practical and technological skills in drawing and decoration, as well as etching and lithographic printing techniques.<sup>61</sup> In Hanoi, the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine* [The Fine Arts School of Indochina], (EBAI), was the first school dedicated to the high arts in Indochina and is discussed later in Chapter 4. The EBAI also sought to train students vocationally and to equip them with transferable skills that they could apply in the marketplace. Over twenty years of operation from 1925, the EBAI and its faculty of 60 teachers would profoundly influence the visual arts in Vietnam, and, the revolutionary project.

### 3.5 “They built more prisons than schools”

In the Declaration of Independence of Vietnam [Tuyên ngôn độc lập Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hòa],<sup>62</sup> Hồ Chí Minh lambasted colonial authorities for official neglect. Before a crowd of half a million people in Hanoi on September 2, 1945, Hồ Chí Minh catalogued French failings during the eight decades of colonisation. On the list was the claim that the French “built more prisons than schools.”

However, Brocheux and Hémery argue that the French did make significant, sustained efforts to further education in Indochina.<sup>63</sup> The abolition of the antiquated Confucian system was an important modernising step in the educational reform and social transformation of the indigenous population, as much as it furthered French political and bureaucratic interests. The introduction of *Quốc ngữ*, again for the promotion of French interests, was a democratisation of the education system, and, the radical catalyst for building indigenous class and ethnic solidarity, as well as national unity. Furthermore, the promotion of educational schools, particularly in the visual arts, brought a cohort of expert and charismatic teachers to the colony, whose impact on the indigenous students they taught was profound.

By instituting reforms in the areas of literacy and fine arts tutelage, colonial authorities unwittingly provided the skills for the DRV propaganda artists to produce dynamic propaganda art, and the indigenous population to ‘read’ those propaganda messages in an unprecedented shared vernacular. Those messages articulated “the concept of a modern nation made sublime by the resistance to colonisation.”<sup>64</sup> Without these significant French reforms, the DRV’s ability to communicate with its diverse audience would have been impeded, as perhaps would the prosecution of the war for independence.

<sup>60</sup> Huynh Boi Tran, “Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 Onwards,” (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2005), 87.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>62</sup> The Proclamation was written by Hồ Chí Minh and announced by him in public at Ba Đình flower garden (now Ba Đình Square) on September 2, 1945.

<sup>63</sup> Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 219.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

There is little doubt that the colonial authorities placed the tenets of the civilising mission high on the agenda in order to win over the people, but only in as much as it suited the regime's agenda, which was influenced by economic imperatives, budgetary restrictions, regime security, and the *colons* endless greed and disapproval, as well as the individual politics and personalities of the parade of governors-general in the colony's history. Whatever reforms, rafts of promises, concessions, sops, and lies offered over the years in exchange for indigenous support were always too little, too late, or too non-existent.

Jean Jaurès was not the only voice that warned of impending disaster. In 1913, a seasoned pacification commander, General Théophile Pennequin was recalled to Paris for his pro-indigenous stance. He cautioned his colleagues as he left: "We have conquered Indochina and we have pacified it, but we have not won the souls."<sup>65</sup> To win the hearts and minds<sup>66</sup> of the Vietnamese was the vainglorious mission of colonialism, a quest, like the grail, forever out of reach. That quest was taken up by the anti-colonial forces arrayed against the colonial regime and its later pretenders, in the bid for control of Vietnam in dynamic and new ways.

In their bid to capture hearts rather than citadels, the Việt Minh broadened their campaign to communicate with and to mobilise all strata of Vietnamese society, in particular the vast rural masses, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Their support was crucial in bringing about the monumental defeat of French forces at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 (see Figure 13). By this time, most of the glittering effects of the 1931 Paris Colonial Exhibition had long flown like the phantoms of yesteryear. What was left on the battlefield in north-western Vietnam was a shattered imperial façade, as France's dazzling, conflicted and violent colonial adventure in *l'Extrême-Orient* was brought to a humiliating end.



Figure 13 "Điện Biên Phủ has fallen," *Le Parisien*, May 9, 1954, signalling the end of French intervention in Indochina, courtesy of Alpha History.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>66</sup> A term attributed to French Army General Hubert Lyautey (1854–1934), Douglas Porch, "Bugeaud, Gallieni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, (USA: Princeton University Press, 1986), 394.



# Chapter 4 Reading Propaganda: the poetry in the struggle for Vietnamese Independence

“Natives educated in our methods and in our ideas  
[...] are the most dangerous to our authority.”<sup>1</sup>

Vietnamese visual communication in the form of strikingly designed posters produced by visual artists may have been a new phenomenon when first distributed in the Vietnamese villages and army camps during the First Indochina War but the accompanying slogans, in the new script *Quốc ngữ*, were not. Many of those ‘words’ had cultural roots that reached far back into Vietnamese tradition to the earliest formations of peasant societies,<sup>2</sup> and tapped the vast treasure trove of Vietnamese verse forms, oral poetry, wordplay, and folklore.

This chapter explores the literary roots of Vietnamese visual communication and asserts that there is a link between Vietnamese oral and written traditions of poetry and the slogans, images, and themes, of the DRV’s political posters. The chapter connects three critical elements. First, there was a pre-existing tradition of conveying complex messages through short phrases and wordplay, such as poetic couplets, lyrics, riddles, adages and maxims developed over millennia in Vietnamese oral and folk poetry. Second, the visual communication motifs of heroism, battling against the odds, and sacrifice are part of a rich tradition in Vietnamese poetry and storytelling. Finally, the Vietnamese communists directly engaged with a pre-literate but intensely cultured rural majority through a predominantly visual communication form that made complex political messages intelligible, recognisable and compelling. These elements supported a Vietnamese audience to ‘read’ the image-saturated messages. The Vietnamese visual communications thus connected the past with the present, and elites with peasants, to offer a vision of a future utopia: a blueprint for national salvation and the ideal society for all Vietnamese.

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of language and its role in the formation of national identity; the influence of Chinese literary classics, the development of Vietnamese poetry, and the role of literature in Vietnamese society of all classes. The chapter highlights the connection between examples of Vietnamese poetry and the messaging (via slogans, themes, subject, and symbols) on a sample of political posters. It concludes by connecting the valorisation of idealised characteristics of Vietnamese national identity, such as heroism, resilience, and sacrifice, to national salvation and the necessity for a prolonged ‘total war’ strategy despite escalating conflagration.

<sup>1</sup> Henry Simon, French, Minister for Colonies (1917–1920), quoted in Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly, *Indochina: an ambiguous colonisation 1858–1954*, (Berkeley, L.A. Calif.: University of California Press, 2009), 225.

<sup>2</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông, “Introduction,” in *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), xxv.

## 4.1 Language, identity and cross-fertilisation

Sociologist Anthony Smith asserts that national identity is transmitted through socialisation, a system of beliefs, values, assumptions, and expectations.<sup>3</sup> Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski observes that “it is by the very vehicle of thought, that is by language” that “the mental states” of members of a community “receive a certain stamp.”<sup>4</sup> Political scientist, Benedict Anderson notes that “much the most important thing about language is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities*” [his italics].<sup>5</sup>

The development of the Vietnamese language is a complex matrix of oral traditions and multiple writing systems, and foreign interventions. Before French colonisation, there was the Chinese annexation, which over a thousand years profoundly influenced Vietnamese society and culture, especially through China’s five-thousand-year legacy of literature.

The Vietnamese language existed only in oral form until the era of Chinese Imperial rule (111BCE–938CE), when standard Chinese characters (*chữ Nho*) were used to transcribe spoken Vietnamese. Around the fourteenth century, the Vietnamese indigenised the Chinese writing system.<sup>6</sup> However, official business and scholarship were still conducted in *chữ Nho*, while the indigenised form, *chữ Nôm* was used for popular literature. Neither system was able to be read by the masses. Only an educated elite, typically the mandarin class, wrote and read these scripts. That is until the twentieth century, when the French replaced both writing systems with *chữ Quốc ngữ* (hereafter *Quốc ngữ*), a script based on the Latin alphabet developed by Alexandre de Rhodes, a Jesuit priest, to assist missionary work in seventeenth-century Vietnam, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In the twentieth century, *Quốc ngữ* was implemented to assist with the teaching of French as a second language. At times, all writing systems were in play, such as Vietnamese birth certificates in all four scripts, creating further complexity in the multilingual colonial bureaucracy and society (see Appendix D).

<sup>3</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity*, (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 8-15.

<sup>4</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the western pacific: An account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea. Vol. 65*, (Routledge & K. Paul, 1922), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, (London & New York: Verso, 1991), 133.

<sup>6</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông. *Nguyễn Du The Tale of Kiều*, a bilingual edition translated and annotated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông with a historical essay by Alexander B. Woodside, (New Haven: Yale U.P, 1983), xix.

## 4.2 Poetry, peasants, and propaganda

Many scholars have observed that the Vietnamese people have a rich poetic tradition.<sup>7</sup> According to historian Alexander Woodside, “Vietnam is and always has been one of the most literary civilisations on the face of the planet.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, according to literature scholars, the love for literature was shared by all members of Vietnamese society from the ruling class to the rural peasant. Nguyễn Ngọc Bích asserts Vietnamese folk poetry “reflected the common man’s life with its levity, humour and irony.”<sup>9</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông suggests that poetry, jokes and riddles lightened the daily grind in the rice paddies, and became a staple of after-hours communal cultural activities in the village.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, farmers who were able to quote and extemporise cleverly won admiration for “their skill in improvising rhymes and ditties.”<sup>11</sup> Scholars, Joel Montague and Nora Taylor noted that “people competed to find an economy and subtlety of words to convey deep sentiments”<sup>12</sup> at poetry festivals and singing contests organised in and between the villages.

The tonal nature of Vietnamese provides opportunities for intricate wordplay and complex meaning. According to historian Douglas Pike, the Vietnamese term, *đấu tranh* [struggle], a fundamental revolutionary concept, overshadows the English word definition, which fails “to convey the drama, the awesomeness, the totality of the original” and its “essence of the revolutionary.”<sup>13</sup> With intrinsic attributes of economy and complexity, the Vietnamese language is suited to the sloganeer’s requirement of making powerful statements in a simple manner.

The art of poetry, wordplay, and folklore rippled throughout Vietnamese society, connecting elite and peasant alike. Poetry as a communication form was an important medium for spreading the message and an accepted oral conduit for transmitting ideas and messages to and from the rural populace and the ruling class of the day. According to Goscha, Vietnamese literature “percolated into far-flung villages, thanks to gifted storytellers and local mandarins with extraordinary gifts of memory,”<sup>14</sup> who entertained a vast audience eager for the fabulous stories that *chữ Nôm* had unlocked and inspired.<sup>15</sup>

Vietnamese literature scholar Huỳnh Sanh Thông describes *chữ Nôm* as “a rather cumbersome system” that nevertheless had “an electrifying effect” on Vietnamese literature by fusing Chinese classical influences with Vietnamese folk traditions.<sup>16</sup> Notably, this ‘marriage’ produced a new

<sup>7</sup> Including Huỳnh Sanh Thông, Alexander Woodside and Neil Jamieson.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Bích, *A Thousand Years of Vietnamese Poetry*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 39.

<sup>10</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *Nguyễn Du*, xxv.

<sup>11</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *Heritage*, xxv.

<sup>12</sup> Joel Montague and Nora A. Taylor, “North Vietnamese Propaganda Posters 1965-1985,” *Vietnam*, 04, (1997): 37.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1966), 85.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 342.

<sup>15</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *Heritage*, xxv.

<sup>16</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *Nguyễn Du*, xix.

genre of the long narrative poem called *truyện nô*” [*tale in the southern script*], such as the revered work, *The Tale of Kiều* [*Kim Vân Kiều*], which I discuss later in the chapter.

In developing *truyện nô*, the Vietnamese poets found their own, often subversive voice in the Chinese model. However, unlike Chinese poets writing for a court elite, Vietnamese poets wrote for the ordinary people, 80 to 90 percent of whom lived in the villages throughout pre-literate Vietnam. Furthermore, by devising *truyen nom* in the customary metre of folk poetry, that is, *lục bát* [six-eight] verse, already familiar to the masses, the Vietnamese poets enabled their poetry to be remembered, recited and endlessly quoted.<sup>17</sup>

### 4.3 *Ca dao*: the poetry of protest

For rural and urban communities, *truyện nô* joined an already lively tradition of folk poetry, such as *ca dao* [folk], a freewheeling form of poetry comprising short lyric phrases designed to be sung *a cappella*. Literary critic Vu Quang Phu asserts that creating and performing *ca dao* was a treasured pastime by educated and non-educated classes alike.<sup>18</sup> Many lyrics in *ca dao* express human emotional states, especially longing, nostalgia, and love for family, community, nature, and country. The following examples, translated by John Balaban, demonstrate the economy of words, redolent imagery, wordplay and intensity of feeling:<sup>19</sup>

#### *THE SAIGON RIVER*

*The Saigon River slides past the Old Market,  
its broad waters thick with silt. There  
the rice shoots gather a fragrance,  
the fragrance of my country home,  
recalling my mother home, stirring deep love.*

#### *THE WIND PLAYS WITH THE MOON*

*The wind plays with the moon; the moon with the wind  
The moon sets. Who can the wind play with?*

*Ca dao* captures the diurnal cycle of everyday life in Vietnam with its ups and downs, joys and miseries,<sup>20</sup> as well as a vehicle for expressing social and political dissatisfaction along with the longing for a better life with wry humour:

#### *THREE YEARS AT THIS OUTPOST*

*Three years at this outpost,  
Guarding by day, nights spent  
Waiting on the mandarin.  
Slashing bamboo and chopping wood,  
The bad food, whom do I complain to?*

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., xix.

<sup>18</sup> Quang Phu Van, “Translating Vietnamese Folk Poetry: John Balaban’s *Ca Dao*,” Volume XLIV, Issue 1: *Viet Nam: Beyond the Frame* (Part Two), Winter 2005): n.p.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., n.p.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., n.p.

*Complain to the ironwood and to the plums.  
Complain to the bamboo shoots and to the corn.  
In the clear water of the well, a fish splashes free.*<sup>21</sup>

Less amusing are the sardonic “sayings and songs” that, according to Truong Buu Lam, “circulated widely around the plantations” in Cochinchina (discussed in Chapter 3), depicting the harrowing conditions:

*How healthy and beautiful are the rubber trees!  
Under each one of them, a corpse of a worker is buried.*<sup>22</sup>

A similar economy is an essential characteristic of propaganda sloganeering, and DRV poster slogans are often written in *lục-bát* and its variations. As Scott observes, DRV “visual materials were often accompanied by texts in the traditional six-eight verse format.”<sup>23</sup> The *lục-bát* metre connected the slogans to an age-old tradition and made them relatable, memorable, and ‘spreadable’.

These evocative phrases and themes in the posters are critical to the acceptance, understanding, and success of visual communications during the conflict era. They are also vital to the acculturation of the political messaging campaigns during the conflict era as the DRV sought to communicate its ideas, policies, and news to its vast rural and pre-literate population.

#### 4.4 The development of a national script

The lack of literacy in Vietnam due to the complexity of the Chinese character-based scripts only began to change when the French insisted on replacing the Chinese character-based script *chữ nôm* with the Romanised written script, *Quốc ngữ* for the Vietnamese spoken word in the early 1900s. This new national vernacular renewed the popularity of the vast repository of Vietnamese folklore, folk sayings, and characters that lived in their rich oral tradition and imagination and could now be printed on modern presses by the burgeoning indigenous publishing sector, especially after the First World War. Several scholars have argued the link between the rise of print capitalism in the 1920s and 1930s, and, the growth of Vietnamese nationalism as part of the success of the revolution and the overthrow of colonialism.<sup>24</sup>

The interwar decades saw a boom in indigenous publishing by the Vietnamese intelligentsia on social reform, patriotism and nationalism, ironically by a “loosening on restrictions governing freedom of expression” by colonial authorities.<sup>25</sup> However, this efflorescence of nationalist publications was produced and consumed almost exclusively by urban literati. The vast rural majority were simply not

<sup>21</sup> Linh Dinh, “Ca Dao: Seven Vietnamese Folk Poems,” *Mānoa*, Vol. 7, No. 2, *New Writing from Viet Nam* (University of Hawai’i Press, 1995): 47.

<sup>22</sup> Truong Buu Lam, *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writing since Colonialism, 1900–1931*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 42.

<sup>23</sup> Phoebe Scott, “Forming and reforming the artist: modernity, agency and the discourse of art in North Vietnam, 1925–1954,” (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2014), 190.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Bradley, *Vietnam at War*; Marr Vietnamese Tradition; McHale, *Print and Power*.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 22.

involved in the nationalist discussion by virtue of not being able to read.<sup>26</sup> The fact that seventeen or eighteen million ethnic Vietnamese shared the same single spoken language was, as Marr observes, a commonality that “many members of the intelligentsia were slow to appreciate.”<sup>27</sup> It was a connection that Hồ Chí Minh made and engaged with upon his return to Vietnam in 1941 through the publication of a fortnightly newsheet *Viet Nam Doc Lap!* [Independent Vietnam!] specifically for the rural poor,<sup>28</sup> who could not have afforded a metropolitan newspaper, even if they had been able to read it.

Printed on a flat rock and roller in a northern jungle stream overlooked by a limestone mountain, Hồ Chí Minh had named *Suối Lênin* [Lenin Springs] and *Các Mác* Peak after his communist heroes Vladimir Lenin and Karl Marx, *Viet Nam Doc Lap*'s humble beginnings belied its sophisticated political campaigning techniques and enormous public relations value. Issued fortnightly, the paper included poetry and cartoons often by Ho Chi Minh himself (see Figure 14). Copies of the paper were distributed by Việt Minh cadres who would read it to villagers or choose someone who could do so, just as the mandarins had recited *truyen nom* in the past.

Historian, Mark Bradley notes that this type of direct engagement and willingness to be involved with peasant concerns “represented a sharp break from the more elitist traditions of Vietnamese anti-colonialism.”<sup>29</sup> It represented a new, modern technique of political marketing that would become the gamechanger in the battle by all antagonists for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. The ‘little tradition’ of village culture was the active ingredient in the DRV’s communication efforts that enabled the party elite to communicate with the people. It would become in time an awesome propaganda machine, tried and tested by war.



**Figure 14 Hồ Chí Minh (1890–1969), *The poor eat poorly*, 1942, Illustration, *Viet Nam Doc Lap*, courtesy of the Vietnam Museum of Revolution, Hanoi.<sup>30</sup>**

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 158.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Rob Hurlé, *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2012), 239.

<sup>29</sup> Bradley, *Vietnam at War*, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Nghèo phải ăn lạt [The poor eat poorly]; [my translation]. The cartoon depicts a Vietnamese peasant burdened by wartime taxes and food shortages due to French and Japanese collaboration.

## 4.5 Tapping into tradition, emulating heroines, and *The Tale of Kiều*

According to historian Shawn McHale, it was not until the Second World War that the Vietnamese communists, harrying the Vichy French administration and Japanese military occupation, began to communicate directly with the masses of ordinary people in rural areas and with language and ideas that resonated with the majority of Vietnamese.<sup>1</sup> Marxist theory was downplayed, and Vietnamese historical and mythical acts of defiance lauded and promoted.

Bradley notes that there was “a powerful indigenous tradition in folktales of the Vietnamese as indomitable resistance heroes,”<sup>2</sup> which surfaced in the DRV propaganda materials. The Việt Minh writers began to extol the virtues and exploits of historical and legendary characters such as the fifteenth-century emperor, Lê Lợi, the tenth-century Trưng Sisters, and the third-century heroine, Triệu Thị Trinh, commonly known as Bà Triệu [Lady Trieu]. According to legend, Bà Triệu rode into battle naked from the waist-up on an elephant defeating the enemy with her 12-foot-long breasts.<sup>3</sup> In some Chinese accounts, her ‘weapons’ of choice are said to be 18-foot long. Derived from folkloric and poetry traditions, these characters, particularly the ‘female warrior’ populate and enliven the world of DRV visual communications.

From the poetic tradition, the fictional character of Kiều in the *truyen nom* poem, *The Tale of Kiều* is a supreme example of the struggle for survival in a world of enemies. Written by the poet Nguyễn Du, in the early 1800s, *The Tale of Kiều* is considered the “supreme masterwork of Vietnamese literature.”<sup>4</sup> Also known as *The Tale of Kim, Van, and Kiều* or simply as *Kiều*, it is an epic character-driven poem of 3,254 verses, written in *lục-bát* metre, or six-eight syllable couplet stanza form. Translator Huỳnh Sanh Thông asserts that *Kiều* was known by millions of Vietnamese, who knew and could recite famous lines. Cultural historian Neil Jamieson emphasises that “the Vietnamese in all walks of life [who] could recite long passages from poems, recount folktales, and discuss novels as if the characters lived next door.”<sup>5</sup>

*The Tale of Kiều* is widely seen as emblematic of Vietnam’s national narrative. Historian Alexander Woodside asserts that *Kiều* captures the essential characteristics of Vietnamese national identity:

Western readers who are curious about Vietnam and the Vietnamese may well gain more real wisdom from cultivating a discriminating appreciation of this poem than they will from reading the entire library of scholarly and journalistic writings upon modern Vietnam which has accumulated in the West in the past two decades.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shawn Frederick McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 131-133.

<sup>2</sup> Bradley, *Vietnam at War*, 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

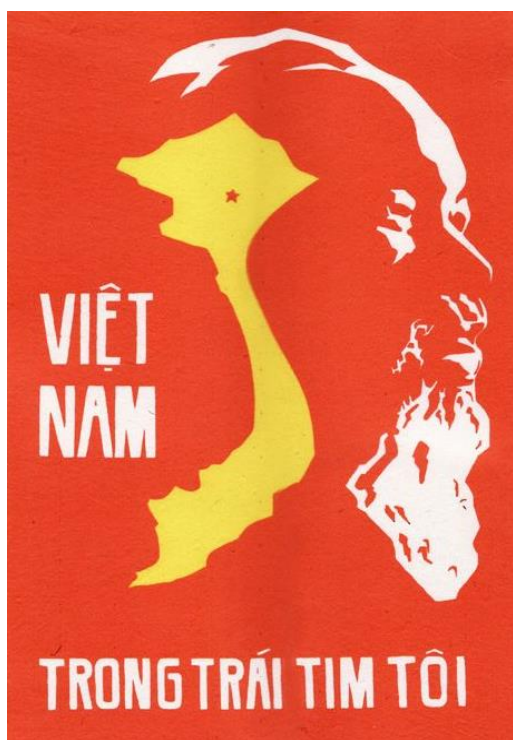
<sup>4</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *Nguyễn Du*, xx.

<sup>5</sup> Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), ix.

<sup>6</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *Nguyễn Du*, xi.

With this sort of cultural primacy, it is not surprising that the poem was used to promote a variety of differing political interpretations. In the 1920s and 1930s, according to Marr, *Kiều* was “brandished by conservative collaborators [and] wept over by romantics.”<sup>7</sup> For Marxist critics at the time, the poem was a decadent hangover from the despised pre-colonial imperial system. However, during the Second World War, *Kiều*’s reputation was renovated and given anti-imperialist credentials by the Việt Minh intellectuals, who saw how the heroine’s popularity, story and traits could be used to promote the nationalist cause.<sup>8</sup> *Kiều*’s ultimate optimism, her “struggle-oriented patriotic nature” and especially her self-sacrifice and that of her lover, the rebel leader Từ Hải were viewed as models for an ideal Vietnamese identity and a timeless Vietnamese heroism in the face of a foreign, existential threat.<sup>9</sup>

The poem’s original and emotive title, *A New Cry from a Broken Heart* is indicative of *Kiều*’s arresting lyricism. The propaganda poster *Vietnam in my heart* (see Figure 15) suggests this emotive line lyrically and figuratively. The poster depicts Vietnam as a single unitary nation, Hồ Chí Minh in the role of “Father of the Nation” and an artful use of the phrase *Việt Nam trong trái tim tôi* [*Vietnam in my heart*], which expresses a profound and emotional love for country. In the poster, the slogan is printed as it would be said in conversational Vietnamese. If it were written, it is more properly presented as *Việt Nam trong trái tim của tôi* [my emphasis]. The poster’s deliberate use of the spoken word version suggests that it is designed to be articulated in the viewer’s mind and repeated verbally.



**Figure 15** Artist unknown, *Vietnam in my heart*, n.d., Woodblock, courtesy of the Dogma Collection.

<sup>7</sup> David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920–1945*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1981), 283.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.



A primary tenet of Confucian philosophy, ‘filial piety’, that is, loyalty to family, especially the patriarch, is a principal theme in the poem, *The Tale of Kiều*, and becomes the pivot of the nationalist narrative. The poem tells the life and trials of a beautiful and talented young woman who sacrifices her happiness to save her family from disgrace. The heroine, Kiều, and her family have fallen on hard times. Her father has been imprisoned on a false charge by a corrupt bureaucracy. Kiều marries (without love) to save her family but is tricked into prostitution. She is raped, humiliated, accused of theft and thrown out of a Buddhist sanctuary. After many trials and sacrifices, Kiều and her first love are reunited. All of which could be read as an allegory for Vietnam’s troubles and torments, and was promoted as such by the nationalist propagandists.

Kiều’s intense sense of family duty was seen by the Vietnamese as an exemplary characteristic. Her sacrifice of individual happiness for the collective good is an emblem of the revolution and a trope that is mythologised and distributed throughout the Vietnamese visual communication. Rather than attempting to replace it with loyalty to the communist party, the campaign transforms it into loyalty to ‘the fatherland’. These ideas are typically expressed in the posters through equating Vietnam as “The Fatherland” and Hồ Chí Minh as “The Father of the Nation.”

The concept of Kiều’s bondage and slavery as a symbol of Vietnam’s subjugation is also referenced in the posters through reverse tropes, such as *Nothing is more precious than freedom and independence*, a famous saying by Hồ Chí Minh and a major theme in poster production, and the defence of those privileges, such as *Stop, colonialists, imperialists, traitors, before you think of taking Vietnam!* (see Figure 16).



Figure 16 Artist unknown, *Stop, colonialists, imperialists, traitors, before you think of taking Vietnam*, n.d., Gouache, courtesy of the Dogma Collection.

The warrior-heroine is a major and distinctive theme of Vietnamese visual propaganda and linked to the sense of duty, bravery and sacrifice as emblematised by Kiều. She is joined by a cast of fictional and real-life heroines from Vietnamese legend and history. The curator of the Dogma Collection, Richard di San Marzano asserts that the Vietnamese depiction of women bearing arms in action is almost unique to Vietnamese art history:

There exists no comparative visual testimony on such a scale, of the participation of women in warfare, or any similar series of images excepting perhaps, sculptural relief and painted ceramic depictions of the semi-mythological Amazons.<sup>10</sup>

There is a traditional folk-saying, *giặc đến nhà đàn bà cũng đánh*, which translates to “*when the enemy is at the gate, the woman goes out fighting*.”<sup>11</sup> Women are championed in the posters as defenders and fighters of the nation such as Đường Ngọc Cảnh’s poster, *We must protect the homeland and the youth* (see Figure 1).

In the visual communication of the First and Second Indochina wars, women are depicted in virtually all facets of war-making from homeland defence to frontline operations, such as agricultural production, strategic communications, anti-aircraft defence, munitions supply, local militia, and combat. Notable Vietnamese figures from history and folklore are heavily promoted, such as the tenth-century Trung Sisters, who repulsed an invading army and later committed suicide rather than face capture.<sup>12</sup> Their heroism is a motif that the posters mythologised and exploited repeatedly as part of hero-emulation campaigns designed to promote national character and voluntary enlistment into the military services. The glorious past would have its modern equivalents soon enough.

Among the most valorised of heroes were women who joined the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam during the Second Indochina War. They were often referred to as the “long-haired army,” so called as southern women traditionally wore their hair loose unlike their northern counterparts. The incredible stories of real-life Vietnamese heroines Võ Thị Sáu and Lê Thị Hồng Gấm were memorialised in Propaganda of the Deed legends and ‘hero emulation’ campaigns that tapped a long Sino-Vietnamese tradition of hero worship and martyr veneration.

In 1945, Võ Thị Sáu began fighting for the Việt Minh at the age of 14 when she threw a grenade at French policemen. Evading capture for several years, she was finally imprisoned on Côn Sơn Island prison and executed by guillotine in 1948 at the age of 19. Võ Thị Sáu’s legend developed into a spiritual, cult-like following of devotees who venerate her grave to this day.

<sup>10</sup> di San Marzano, “A Revolutionary Spirit: an introduction to Vietnamese Propaganda Art,” Dogma Collection (online): n.p.

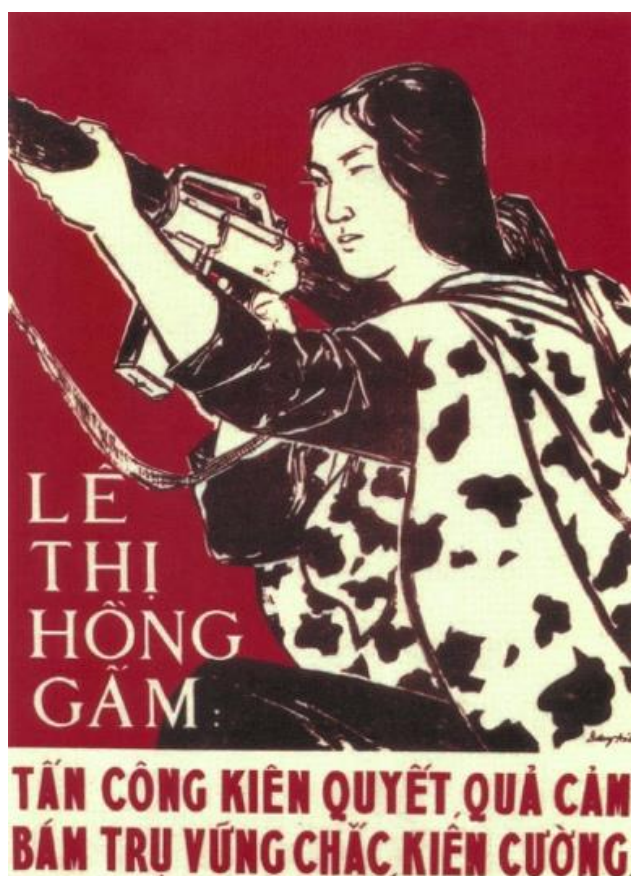
<sup>11</sup> Le Van Vien, *Vietnam Posters & Billboards*, (Ho Chi Min City: The Gioi Publishing House/Artbook, 2014), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị, known Hai Bà Trưng, [literally, two ladies Trưng], were Vietnamese military leaders and heroines who ruled for three years after rebelling in 40CE against the first Chinese occupation of Vietnam.

Posters and songs valorised her memory during the conflict era, and annual arena-style spectacles are still given in her memory. Produced on a technologically grand scale, these contemporary concerts echo the traditional village festivals discussed earlier.

In the Second Indochina War, Lê Thị Hồng Gấm, fought with the guerrilla forces in South Vietnam. Caught in an ambush in 1970, she avoided capture by killing herself with her last bullet in a tragic modern echo of the Trưng legend (see Figure 17).

‘Hero emulation’ campaigns were a critical function in mobilising the Vietnamese population.<sup>13</sup> Emulation campaigns were designed to encourage volunteer enlistment in local militia to protect villages, and service teams to assist the transport of troops and supplies to battlefields, such as Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, and on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail throughout the 1950s and 1960s. According to Goscha, over two million northern women volunteered for militia and support teams in the Second Indochina War.<sup>14</sup> The gendered subject of many of the posters memorialises the exploits of women in a variety of roles at the home and battle fronts and connects them symbolically to the character of Kiều through the concepts of destiny and sacrifice.



**Figure 17** Dương Ánh (1934–), *Lê Thị Hồng Gấm made a determined attack on the enemy's position*, 1970, Gouache, courtesy of the David Heather Collection.

<sup>13</sup> Goscha, *Vietnam*, 331.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

In *The Tale of Kiều*, ‘fate’ is a major theme. A person’s destiny cannot be averted. It can only be accepted, endured and atoned. However, for Kiều, this inevitable destiny exacts the heavy price of personal sacrifice. Only through forbearance and atonement, is the suffering ended:

*High Heaven has observed your constant faith  
You saved your father when you sold yourself.  
You spared uncounted lives the curse of war –  
Your country and your people were well served.*<sup>15</sup>

Through sacrifice, as Huỳnh Sanh Thông observes, “Kiều is reunited with her family and her lover. So too, many Vietnamese believe that Viet Nam will be reunited.”<sup>16</sup> The North and the South are bound together. Therefore, the partition of North and South (“*the cry of the broken heart*”) was seen as unnatural and against ‘the divine’ and its reunification as a manifest destiny, imbued with a sacred duty.

*A karma each of us has to live out  
let’s stop decrying heaven’s quirks and whims.  
Within us each there lies the root of good:  
The heart means more than all talents on earth.*

In the poem’s resolution, harmony and happiness (read: peace) is restored through the great resilience of the family (read: the nation), and the righting of a wrong, when Kiều finds and marries her first and true love (read: reunification).

Other poets writing during the conflict era, reimagined the marriage of Kim and Kiều in poems that metaphorically link the reunification of North and South, such as in the following lines from Vien Phuong’s 1967 poem, “We shall be wedded in the spring:”

*I shall look for you. Put on your new clothes.  
When the guns fall silent, wedded we shall be.  
Over our free land, in the Spring of Victory,  
Two white doves shall take wing in the azure sky.*<sup>17</sup>

By linking victory with peace, and marriage with reunification, we have an artful allegory for participation, resilience, sacrifice, and salvation in wartime that is mirrored in a beloved traditional Vietnamese literary masterwork and contemporary propaganda poetry. The final lines of Vien Phuong’s poem, *We shall be wedded in the spring*, imagine a triumphant denouement, decked with symbols of nationalism, and, a remarkable prefiguring of the name change of Sài Gòn to Hồ Chí Minh City long before the guns fell silent:

*Rifle in hand,  
I shall walk into the heart of Saigon singing the Song of Liberation  
And plant our flag on this town of glory,  
So the Gold Star will shine over Ho Chi Minh City.*<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *Nguyễn Du*, 12.

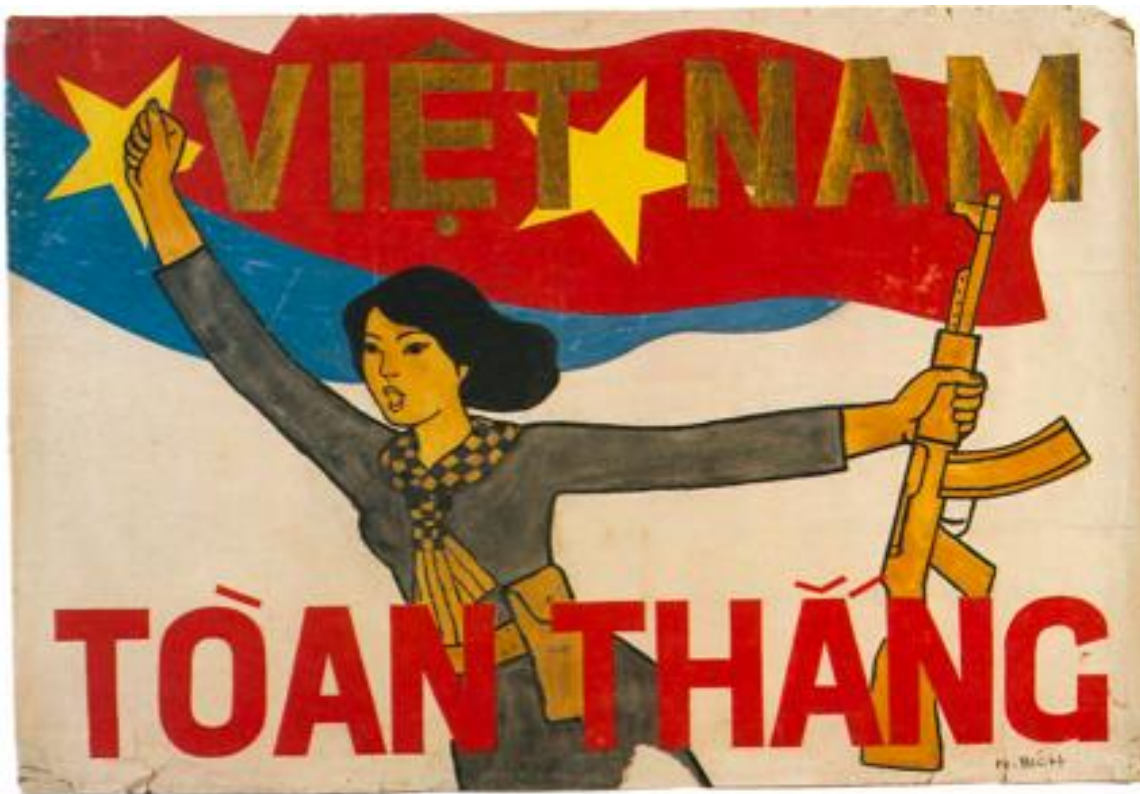
<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Literature and national liberation in South Vietnam, Vol. 14.*, (Hanoi: Xunhasaba, 1967), 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

In Nguyễn Bích's poster, *Vietnam's ultimate triumph*, the central role is given to a female soldier, AK46 in hand with the flags of the DRV and NLF fluttering above her head (see Figure 18). According to Professor Nguyen Ngoc Dung, the artist's gendered subject is reminiscent of another independence heroine featured in *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugene Delacroix (1798–1863) and that like “the French work of the previous century, the young woman evokes a sense of romanticism, with victory and peace to follow.”<sup>19</sup>

The allegory of ultimate victory, reunification and peace, in the face of great struggle, torment and trial is perpetuated in the posters. The notion of victory as an inexorable and inevitable destiny is frequently expressed in themes, images, and language of the posters, many of which were produced during periods of the worst civilian and military losses and setbacks (see Figure 19 and Figure 20). The art of propaganda and the propagandist is to make these links, forcing the amalgamation of the past with the future even in, or especially in, an unbearable present, which is repeatedly expressed in the posters, such as *The world must be at peace* (see Figure 19). The interpretation and execution are in the artists' domain.



**Figure 18** Nguyễn Bích (1925–2011), *Vietnam Total Victory*, n.d, Mixed media, as reproduced in Nguyen Ngoc Dung, “Why Vietnam Won the War,” 63.

<sup>19</sup> Nguyen Ngoc Dung, “Why Viet Nam Won the War,” in *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Vietnam and Cuba 1965–1975*, (Santa Monica: Smart View Press, 1996), 66.



Figure 19 Artist unknown, *The world must have peace*, n.d., Gouache, courtesy of the Dogma Collection.



Figure 20 Unidentifiable signature, *Victory is ours*, 1963, Gouache, courtesy of the Dogma Collection.



**Figure 21** Artist unknown, *Peace throughout all Vietnam*, 1975, Gouache, courtesy of War Remnants Museum, HCMC.

The 1975 victory was extensively memorialised in celebratory posters, which reiterated the themes of manifest destiny and transformational love as expressed in *Kiều* and other poems. A karmic joy is conveyed in posters, such as *One hundred years to have one today* and *Peace throughout Vietnam* (see Figure 21). Annual celebrations in Vietnam continue to mark the reunification year with propaganda campaigns reiterating the message, including posters, fireworks and the street illuminations utilising the same iconography of doves, flowers, stars, hearts, and the two flags of North and South Vietnam, now united as Vietnam (see Figure 22).

From this exploration of poetry and propaganda, we can see that words, as we have been told, matter a great deal. Malinowski and Anderson argue that words form character and communities that are imagined but through belief become realities for which millions of people are prepared to follow, to kill, and to die. Huỳnh Sanh Thông tells us that words were the counterpoint to the slog of everyday life in the delta and highland villages of Vietnam. The French understood the power of words as a conduit to express cultural influence and revolutionary ideas and sought to control them. They were not the only ones to do so. The word Vietnam itself, popularised by Hồ Chí Minh and others, had the power to imagine, unite and ignite a nation to endure a protracted era of war and unimaginable suffering.

By exploring the connection between poetry and propaganda, we can see the connection between ideas and people. The colonial imposition and promotion of *Quốc ngữ* as a common written language was profound. It generated unprecedented literacy and allowed the Vietnamese to express their national culture through their national literature in immeasurable ways. The propaganda materials capitalise on this newfound literacy by utilising phrases in *Quốc ngữ* to impart the message, frequently in the poetic six-eight metre, and to allow a reading of the images, symbols, themes and ideas designed to define a national community with a common destiny. That the national characteristics of endurance and sacrifice, as exemplified by Kiêu and valorised in the propaganda suite, is what is required to reach that unquestioned destiny is the overarching message of the propaganda and its poetry.

In a traditionally rural society highly attuned to allegory and symbolism, the DRV visual communications exploited and celebrated the connection to Vietnamese literature so beloved at the village level. In that literary repository of popular culture, propaganda was adroit in mining much-loved figures of history and literature to create a shared understanding of what was at stake. By ‘reading propaganda’ in this manner, we can see that its art and its artistry is as much about reflecting society as it is about convincing it. In the hands of painters who were making posters, these themes provided rich sources of visual inspiration, which their training had expertly equipped them to deal with, as we shall see in the next chapter which discusses the effects of the arrival of the French Academy on the Vietnamese art world of the 1920s.



**Figure 22** Street banner, *Live with all your heart and desire*, 2015, 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reunification of Vietnam, Illuminations, HCMC, photograph by the author.



## Chapter 5 *Girl with Lotus and M-16*: the equivocal legacy of the *École des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine*

“Can you see that Western painting has some evolving magic that can express the complications of our hearts?”<sup>1</sup>

There are few French personalities honoured or remembered affectionately in Vietnam today. Among them are bacteriologist Alexandre Yersin, co-discoverer of the cause of the plague, *Yersinia pestis*, and the painter Victor Tardieu (1870–1937), co-founder of the fine arts academy, *l'École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine* [The Fine Arts School of Indochina]. In 2016, both men were acknowledged for their remarkable contributions to the advancement of Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> From his laboratory in Nha Trang, Yersin developed an anti-plague serum and laid the foundations of Vietnam's billion-dollar rubber and coffee industries of today. In Hanoi, Tardieu's academy gave birth to modern Vietnamese painting, and unwittingly the Vietnamese propaganda artform.

However, the birth of modern Vietnamese painting would not have happened if Tardieu had not met a talented Vietnamese painter, Nam Sơn (Nguyễn Văn Thọ, 1890–1973) in Hanoi in 1923. The story of Victor Tardieu and Nam Sơn and the other personalities in their orbit cannot be separated from the history of the visual culture of Vietnam and reminds us that history is often made, even changed, by individuals. The foundation of the EBAI owes as much to their partnership as it does to the social and political climate of the times.

For two decades, from 1925 to 1945, French Indochina's leading fine arts institution, the *École supérieure des Beaux-arts de l'Indochine*, (EBAI), unwittingly trained the major artists of the Vietnamese revolution. The role of French influence and Vietnamese collaboration in the modern Vietnamese artistic tradition is problematic for both colonial and revolutionary sides of the coin and has often been elided in official art histories.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it is a fact that the EBAI laid the groundwork for a burgeoning style of art that was both colonial and Vietnamese, and for which there was no precedent in Vietnamese culture. The aesthetics and techniques so passionately and painstakingly imparted and learnt at the EBAI were turned against the colonial regime during the First Indochina War (1946–1954) and played a significant role in the end of France's imperial adventure.

<sup>1</sup> Anonymous Vietnamese artist, 1945, in Phoebe Scott, “Forming and reforming the artist,” (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012), 1.

<sup>2</sup> In 2016, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc gifted French President François Hollande a lacquer artwork featuring Tardieu and Yersin, commemorating the expertise they had shared with their adopted country of Vietnam. <http://hanoia.com/blog/news/show/the-delicacy-of-vietnam-pms-gift-to-president-hollande>.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Proctor, “Out of the Mould: Contemporary Sculptural Ceramics in Vietnam,” (PhD diss., Sydney University, 2006), 92.

This dialectical irony is the pivot of this chapter, which explores the influence of the French art academy on the cultural and technical origins of Vietnamese revolutionary visual communication. In it, I argue that the propaganda posters that were produced by the fledgling Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) to mobilise and recruit the support of the ‘Vietnamese’ population for the independence movement have their cultural origins in the colonial project of the civilising mission [*mission civilisatrice*]. Moreover, I assert the role of individuals in cultural history and ascribe agency to the EBAI’s French teachers and their Vietnamese students who went on to be involved in the Vietnamese revolution. However, this French legacy was problematic for Vietnamese artists at times,<sup>4</sup> as much as the proponents of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine underpinning the revolution, who sought to remove French cultural influence and French colonial features from a pure Vietnamese national narrative altogether.

As this chapter intends to demonstrate, the impact of the EBAI on the skills and sensibility of the artists is a critical dimension to consider when assessing the propaganda art that mobilised Vietnamese nationalism. Moreover, such an examination allows us to evaluate the propaganda suite as part of a continuum of processes initiated by the colonial regime and co-opted by the revolutionaries for their project. These processes and transfers of skills and aesthetics challenge the view that the Vietnamese iteration of communist propaganda is a shadow of its Marxist and Maoist ‘brothers’. Therefore, I argue that Vietnamese visual propaganda, potentiated by hybrid vigour, is a unique cultural development in Vietnam’s visual culture.

First, the chapter considers the establishment of the EBAI as a product of personal encounters within the official enterprise of the civilising mission of the French colonial project. Then it discusses the curriculum and the faculty, canvassing the transfer of aesthetics, knowledge, skills and ethos that formed part of the ongoing legacy, which was passed from the colonial to the revolutionary period. The chapter then considers the continuities and flows between the two periods of artistic evolution and revolution in Vietnamese art. Throughout the chapter, I refer to several images of Vietnam created by artists during the colonial and post-colonial (or revolutionary) periods in the twentieth century and explain how they can be regarded as propaganda in order to maintain and/or support the claim to rule. Ultimately, I assert that the Vietnamese communist propaganda art succeeds in ways that were unimagined and unparalleled in other communist propaganda iterations, because of the continuities and discontinuities between these different socio-political periods.

<sup>4</sup> Nora Annesley Taylor, “The Artist and the State: The Politics of Painting and National Identity in Hanoi, Vietnam 1925–1995,” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1997), 20.

## 5.1 French ennui encounters the exotic East

When acclaimed French artist Victor Tardieu, and winner of the 1920 Indochina Art Prize [Prix de l'Indochine],<sup>5</sup> set sail for the Far East for a six-month painting expedition as part of the prize, he had no idea he had embarked on a voyage of a lifetime. A journey that would see him leave behind the backbiting Parisian art world, as well as his wife and teenage son, to spend the rest of his life in Hanoi, as the founder of an art academy that gave birth to modern Vietnamese painting, never to return to live in France again.

When Tardieu arrived in France's sparkling Far Eastern colony on February 2, 1921,<sup>6</sup> he was war-weary, world-weary and middle-aged. A classmate of Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and a veteran of the Great War (1914–1918),<sup>7</sup> indeed of the Battle of Verdun (1916),<sup>8</sup> Tardieu hoped that, like the painter Paul Gauguin (1848–1903)<sup>9</sup> thirty years before him, an encounter with the exotic Far East would rejuvenate and even liberate his career and his life.<sup>10</sup> Without knowing it, Victor Tardieu's opportune moment had arrived.

Tardieu was feted by colonial society. As the recipient of an art prize bearing the colony's name, and other awards, such as the Prix Nationale (1902), and a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour (1911),<sup>11</sup> Tardieu's reputation was burnished. Furthermore, he was known for creating artworks on a grand scale. Within months, Tardieu was commissioned by the colonial government to create several vast compositions, totalling 270 square metres for the University of Indochina in Hanoi, that would take years to complete.<sup>12</sup>

Only one of these artworks, *Metropole* has survived, ironically because it was covered over by a 'whitewash' in 1956. In 2006, it was restored by the artist Hoàng Hưng (1946–) as part of the university's centenary celebrations and acknowledged as Vietnam's largest painting.<sup>13</sup> Covering 77 square metres, Tardieu's canvas tableau, *Metropole* (see Figure 23), captured the mixed social landscape of colonial Hanoi with over 200 figures representing colonial and indigenous characters, including former governors-general, academics, and, in a playful and affectionate gesture, his son, Jean.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A French colonial art prize established in 1910 by La Société Coloniale des Artistes Français to promote France's colonies in East Asia. The prize was resumed following WWI and Tardieu became the second recipient in 1920. The award offered travel, accommodation, expenses and stipend for six months in French Indochina.

<sup>6</sup> Fonds Tardieu, Archives 125, 04, 07, n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Benezit Dictionary of Artists, (Oxford Online, 2011), n.p.

<sup>8</sup> The longest and one of the worst battles of WWI.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Mowll Matthews, *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*, (Boston: Yale University Press, 2001), 157-167.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Tardieu (1903–1995), in Corinne de Menonville, *Vietnamese Painting: from Tradition to Modernity*, (Paris: Les Editions d'Art et d'Histoire, 2003), 24.

<sup>11</sup> Fonds Victor Tardieu, 125.01.05, nomination de chevalier dans l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur.

<sup>12</sup> Fonds Victor Tardieu, 125.04.07, contrat pour la réalisation des décors de l'Université de Hanoi.

<sup>13</sup> Nguyễn Minh Huyền. "Reproducing a piece of history," *Việt Nam News*, (May 14, 2006), n.p.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

While painting at the University, Tardieu was befriended by Paul Monet, a former geographer with the French army. An advocate of Franco-indigenous relations and a critic of colonial exploitation,<sup>15</sup> Monet founded the Hanoi Annamite Students Centre [Foyer des Etudiantes Annamités] in 1922.<sup>16</sup> Meeting Tardieu at the university, Monet introduced him to a talented Vietnamese artist Nam Son and urged him to develop his potential as a painter (see Figure 24). What developed was a striking relationship between mentor-student, artist-friend, and perhaps father-son, which had profound meaning for both men and major consequences for modern Vietnamese painting.



**Figure 23** Photograph of Victor Tardieu (1870-1937) in front of his work *Metropole* in the main auditorium of the University of Indochina, Hanoi, c. 1926, courtesy of Catalogue Raisonné: EBAI

<sup>15</sup> J.P. Daughton, "Behind the Imperial Curtain: International Humanitarian Efforts and the Critique of French Colonialism in the Interwar Years," *French Historical Studies* 34, no. 3 (2012): 511.

<sup>16</sup> de Menonville, *Vietnamese Painting*, 24.

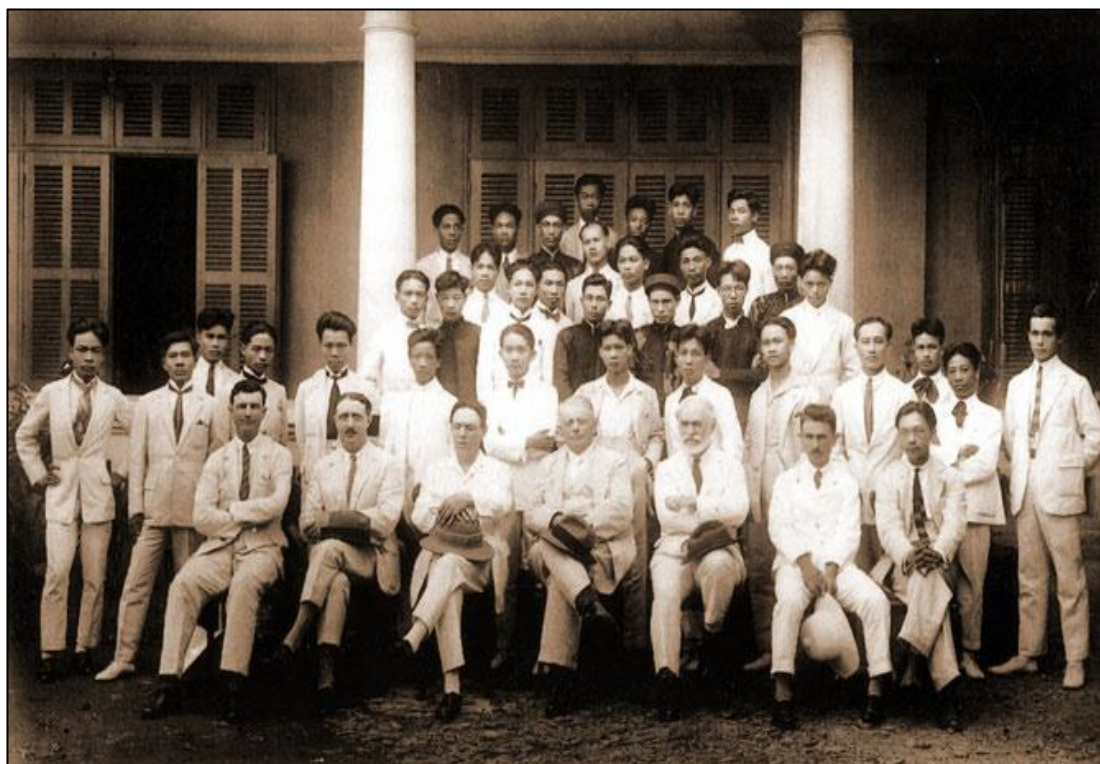


**Figure 24** Photograph of Nam Son (Nguyễn Văn Thọ, 1890–1973) in 1919, courtesy of the artist's family archives.

## 5.2 The foundation of a fine arts school in Indochina

It was Nam Son who proposed the idea of a vocational art school for indigenous students. A long-held dream, he had already written a proposal for the establishment of an art academy that would deliver a western inspired Beaux-arts curriculum to indigenous students in Hanoi (see Appendix D). He urged the well-connected Tardieu to lobby the 23<sup>rd</sup> Governor-General of Indochina, Martial Merlin (1860–1935) for its creation. With what seems astonishing alacrity, the colonial administration agreed, and the EBAI was created by decree in October 1924. That Merlin had only just survived a serious assassination attempt in June may have had something to do with it. Duiker asserts that the attempt sent “shockwaves throughout the French community in Indochina.”<sup>17</sup>

Government sponsorship of such a prestigious cross-cultural project would be a powerful tool in countering criticism of its slowness to implement the benefits of the *mission civilisatrice*. Here was an opportunity to instil the aesthetics, history and ascendancy of French civilization in all its visual brilliance. Within the year, the colonial academy, dedicated to Western classical art instruction, opened its doors, with Victor Tardieu confirmed as principal and Nam Son as deputy, and both as co-founders. The optics could not be bettered (see Figure 25).



**Figure 25** Photograph of Victor Tardieu, front centre, and Nam Son, front right, with teachers and students of the EBAI, Hanoi, c. 1930, courtesy Nguyễn Văn Ninh private collection.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: a Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), 50.

<sup>18</sup> Not all are officially identified. Some artists who are identified and also mentioned in this thesis, include, from left to right, (sitting) Joseph Inguimberty (6<sup>th</sup>); (1<sup>st</sup> line), Nguyễn Phan Chan (2<sup>nd</sup>), Lê Phô (5<sup>th</sup>), Tô Ngọc Vân (6<sup>th</sup>), and Hồ Văn Lai (7<sup>th</sup>); (2<sup>nd</sup> line), Vũ Cao Đàm is on the far right in front of the pillar.

During its 20 years of operation, the EBAI introduced to Vietnam the classical academy skills of anatomical drawing and oil painting.<sup>19</sup> The colonial academy produced 128 highly trained graduates, many becoming renowned international artworld names, including Nguyễn Phan Chan (1892–1984), Tô Ngọc Vân (1906–1954), Lê Phổ (1907–2001) Nguyễn Phan Chan (1892–1984), Vũ Cao Đàm (1908–2000) and Nguyễn Gia Trí (1909–1993). The EBAI followed a classical western art curriculum with classes in drawing, painting, composition, and perspective, as well as anatomy and art history, based on the *École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts*, Paris, but adapted to an indigenous scenario in Indochina.<sup>20</sup>

After the announcement of the creation of the school, Tardieu and Nam Sơn went to France to recruit teachers for the new academy and spruik the new and enhanced conditions of the Prix de l'Indochine.<sup>21</sup> As part of Tardieu's lobby, the art prize was now tied to the EBAI, and its stipend increased from six-months to a two-year residency, including a year of paid teaching at the school, ranking it synonymous with the Prix Nationale.<sup>22</sup>

In all, over 60 French artists taught at the academy, including leading lights of Parisian modernist movements between the world wars. Far from being considered a colonial backwater, the EBAI attracted highly skilled artist-teachers from the ateliers of Paris. Moreover, many faculty members, including Victor Tardieu, Alix Aymé (1894–1889), Joseph Inguimberty (1896–1971) and Andre Maire (1898–1984), dedicated their lives to teaching at the academy, and to living in Asia.

### 5.3 A classical curriculum

By instruction and example, Tardieu introduced to Vietnam, the concept of the vocational artist with a reproducible pedagogical method. His aim was to train artisans to be artists.<sup>23</sup> Though Vietnam had a long artisan history, the concept of 'artist' was an entirely new idea and, along with oil painting, represents a significant innovation, requiring a new position of *họa sĩ* [artist], in addition to the existing *thợ vẽ* [artisan] in Vietnamese society, which traditionally had made no distinction between art and artisanry.<sup>24</sup>

The faculty was made up of French teachers who were also artists in their own right, who produced and taught their art and craft. The curriculum included a mix of art history, practice, theory, along with the passionate ideas and philosophies of romanticism, idealism, and poeticism. Western art concepts, such as subjectivity, objectivity, perspective, individualism, and authorship (such as

<sup>19</sup> Quang Việt, "The Fine Arts College of Indochina: A History," in *Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina*, (Hanoi: NXB Mỹ Thuật, 1998), 139.

<sup>20</sup> Bertrand de Hartingh, "Historical Introduction," in *Vietnam Plastic and Visual Arts from 1925 to Our Time*, (Brussels: Espace Méridien), 40.

<sup>21</sup> Huynh Tran Boi, "Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 Onwards," (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2005), 116.

<sup>22</sup> For a complete list of artists awarded the Prix de l'Indochine, see Appendix B.

<sup>23</sup> Nora Annesley Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 27.

<sup>24</sup> Huyhn Boi Tran, "Vietnamese Aesthetics," 118.

signature or stamp; in some cases, both) were introduced to students. At the same time, the EBAI introduced major European art movements such as Impressionism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Symbolism to the Vietnamese art world. Western art practices such as oil painting, pigment mixing, life drawing (with models sourced from the local prison), and outdoor painting [*en plein air*] became the fulcrum of the academy's rigorous tuition (see Figure 26).



**Figure 26** Photograph of a life-drawing class at the EBAI, c. 1925, courtesy of Fine Arts Publishers, Hanoi.

Perfected by the impressionist and post-impressionist art movements, *en plein air* was designed to render a painting in the moment rather than from recollection back in the studio. Being in the open air and at the mercy of the elements, necessitated excellent and fast drawing skills as well as portability of equipment and materials, such as easels and satchels, which were relatively recent inventions.

These stylistic and technical interchanges were put to additional uses by war era artists at the battle and home fronts, or guerrilla-style raids, all of which required a fast and impressionable drawing method. The ability to draw fast, along with portable equipment (see Figure 27), was not just a requirement but a necessity, as artist Trịnh Kim Vinh (1932– ) recalled, “If the enemy plane arrives while you were drawing, you had to run.”<sup>25</sup> Even the technique of pigment mixing was taken out of the studio and used in the field. Artist Phạm Thanh Tâm (1934– ) recounts dangerous missions behind enemy lines to paint posters such as *Persistent resistance guarantees victory*, *Soldiers and people unite*, and *Destroy French invaders*, on village walls in enemy territory

<sup>25</sup> di San Marzano, “A Revolutionary Spirit: an introduction to Vietnamese Propaganda Art,” Dogma Collection (online): n.p.



during the First Indochina War, “I went by myself, without even a backpack, only a sack containing a bit of gouache, mostly colour pigments, brushes and a bit of binding agents to mix the colours.”<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 27** A war artist’s kit, including easel, brushes, tube, and satchel inscribed “Cặp vẽ Nguyễn Hoàng - Vượt Trường Sơn,” c. 1972, Central Highlands, HCMC Museum of Fine Arts, photograph by author.<sup>27</sup>

*En plein air* also created an emotional bond between artist and landscape. In the DRV visual propaganda, the Vietnamese landscape from delta to mountain becomes a patriotic motif, legitimising, as Taylor observes, the Vietnamese “claim to their homeland visually.”<sup>28</sup> Nguyễn Sáng (1923–1988) and other war artists, such as Phan Kế An (1923–2018) often included PAVN soldiers in the landscape, which served multiple propagandistic functions, instilling a love of country, a desire to serve, and a wish to support those who were protecting the nation from being taken away from Vietnamese people (see Figure 29). As painter Nguyễn Sáng articulated, “There is art in the country, the loss of country, [and] the loss of freedom is the loss of everything.”<sup>29</sup>

The academy is also credited with the revivification of indigenous art forms, such as painting on silk, and, in the case of lacquerware as a painting medium, the innovation of new art form.<sup>30</sup> EBAI graduates such as Nguyễn Gia Trí (1909–1993) and Nguyễn Khang (1912–1989) excelled in the fastidious and painstaking technique of working with lacquer, which could express satirical humour (see Figure 28) or convey intense emotion (see Figure 29).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., n.p.

<sup>27</sup> Nguyễn Hoàng (1943- ), Vietnamese war artist.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Hoang Dinh Tai, “Painter Nguyen Sang, Hoi painting and resistance,” *Journal of the Fine Arts Department of Photography and Exhibition*, (2015): n.p.

<sup>30</sup> Lisa Safford, “Art at the Crossroads: Lacquer Painting in French Vietnam,” *Transcultural Studies*, (2015): 126-170.



**Figure 28** Nguyễn Khang (1912–1989), *Glorious Return of a Man of Letters to his Village*, 1944, Lacquer, 80 x 183,7 cm, Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi.

The EBAI also revitalised traditional art techniques, such as woodblock printing, silk painting and lacquerware. Supply shortages in the colony of paper, oil paints, and other materials may have been the catalyst for experimenting with watercolours on silk and woodblock lithographic work. Traditional woodblock printing was a viable and portable alternative in times of shortage, and when supplies ran short during the conflict era, many posters were produced in this medium.<sup>31</sup>

Many of the aesthetics, techniques and modalities of the EBAI became characteristic of Vietnamese modernism, reproduced in the curriculum of the Resistance Class, and expressed to a broader and larger audience in the propaganda posters of the revolutionary period.



**Figure 29** Phan Kế An (1923–2018), *Memories of the Northwest*, 1958, Lacquer, 112 x 70 cm, Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi.

<sup>31</sup> Katharine Lockett, “Artists’ Materials and Techniques,” in Jennifer Harrison-Hall, *Vietnam Behind the Lines: Images from the War*, (The British Museum Press, 2002), 91.

## 5.4 Poster making at the academy

In the nineteenth century, French artists propelled technological and aesthetic innovations in poster making, and the involvement of leading artists elevated the standing of poster-making to high art. In the 1860s, French artist, Jules Cherét (1836–1932) began perfecting the technique of colour printing, known as chromolithography, which made the mass production of posters viable. The burgeoning advertising industry utilised posters to promote events and products from bicycles to ballet. By the 1890s, the revenue-making opportunities attracted aspiring and renowned artists, including Tardieu's teacher Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), Édouard Vuillard and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901), whose effervescent and imaginative posters caused a sensation in Paris and across the continent (see Figure 30).<sup>32</sup> The French term *affichiste* [poster artist] was coined to designate the new vocational role of the artist-designer of images for posters and other visual materials.



Figure 30 Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), *France-Champagne*, 1891, Lithograph, courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington.

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth E. Guffey, *Posters: A Global History*, (Chicago: Reaktion Books, 2015), 8-13.

As Europe prepared for war in 1914, combatant nations took advantage of the technology and commissioned artists to advance the national mission through posters designed to mobilise the home front. Tardieu was one of those artists, producing posters and combat art during his war service (see Figure 31). At the EBAI, he endorsed poster-making as a vocational opportunity and as a legitimate artistic pursuit. Moreover, Tardieu advocated the conception of art as being of service to advertising and as a promotional tool for tourism. He had promoted the very idea when he had lobbied government to create the EBAI and extend the conditions of the Prix de l'Indochine.



**Figure 31 Victor Tardieu (1870–1937), *Hospital in the Oatfield*, 1915, Oil on canvas, courtesy of the Florence Nightingale Museum, London.**

The rapid development of print infrastructure in urban Indochina in the 1920s had dramatically increased opportunities for trained local poster designers, or affichistes, to produce posters for commercial purposes, such as the nascent tourist industry.<sup>33</sup> At the academy, students were involved in the preparation of fortnightly magazines involving cartoon illustration.<sup>34</sup> Several artists associated with the EBAI became successful affichistes during the colonial era.

EBAI graduate, Hồ Văn Lai (1926–1931) produced *For your next pleasure trip choose this time ... French Indochina* for the Saigon Tourist Bureau in 1938. His signature and stamp are visible in the right-hand bottom corner (see Figure 32).<sup>35</sup> Figures representing ethnic minorities are grouped around the French flag, a propagandistic device extensively used in the Vietnamese visual communication for very different reasons.

<sup>33</sup> For an examination of efforts to promote Indochina as a destination in the interwar years, see Erich de Wald, “The Development of Tourism in French Colonial Vietnam 1918–1940,” in *Asian Tourism: Growth and Change*, (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Phoebe Scott, “Art and the Press in the Colonial Period: Phong Hóa, Ngày Nay, and the École des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine,” in *Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art*, (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2008), 16.

<sup>35</sup> Other than the tourism poster, his EBAI enrolment details and c. 1930 class photo (on page 60), I have not been able to find out more about this enigmatic artist.



**Figure 32** Hồ Văn Lai (c. 1907 – unknown), *For your next pleasure trip choose this time ... French Indochina*, 1938, Lithograph, 64 x 84 cm, courtesy of The Ross Art Group.

Jos-Henri Ponchin (1897–1981), the son of one of the faculty teachers and 1922 Prix de l’Indochine winner, Antoine Ponchin (1872 – c. 1932), was commissioned to paint a series of images of French Indochina to promote the 1931 International Colonial Exposition in Paris (discussed in Chapter 3). Ponchin’s distinctive imagery caught the public imagination with its orientalist interpretation of the exotic Far East (see Figure 33 and Figure 34).

There are also striking stylistic parallels in the style of Ponchin’s posters and that of some of the wartime posters produced for the DRV, as demonstrated in the colour palette of the poster *Ready to chastise the American invaders* (see Figure 35). These posters share a similar pastel palette and figurative line, which is also evident in Trần Văn Cẩn’s 1960 composition, *Coastal Militia Woman*, considered to be an exemplar of nationalist art (see Figure 36).<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Trinh Cung, “Vietnamese Art During the War,” in *Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art*, (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2008), 56.



Figure 33 Jos-Henri Ponchin (1897–1981), *French Indochina is the ideal land for tourism*, 1931, Lithograph, 112 x 75 cm, courtesy of Saigoneer.



Figure 34 Jos-Henri Ponchin (1897–1981), *French Indochina*, 1931, Lithograph, 112 x 75 cm, courtesy of LiveAuctioneers.

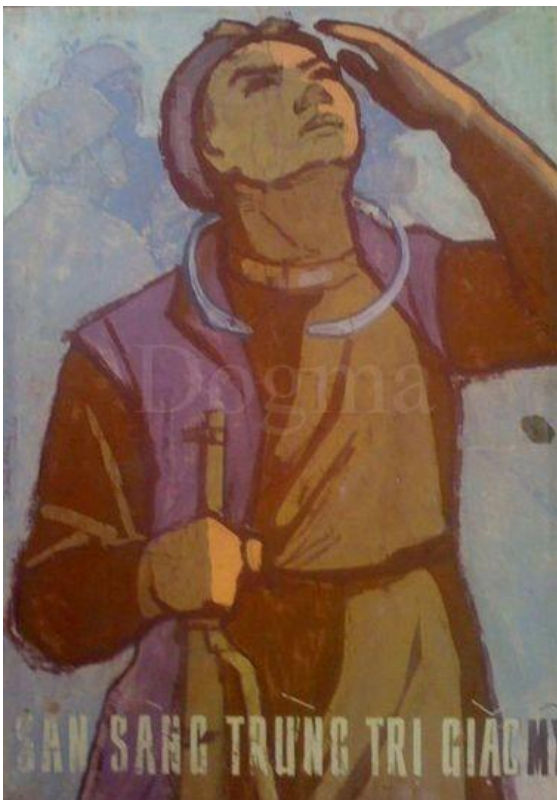


Figure 35 Artist unknown, *Ready to chastise the American invaders*, Gouache, c. 1960s, courtesy of the Dogma Collection.

## 5.5 From craft to modernity: Tardieu's legacy

Tardieu was a significant force for transference of knowledge and skills in a colonial society that largely paid lip service to the education of the colonised. According to Taylor, Tardieu was widely considered to have been “genuinely interested in local art-making technique” and acknowledged the value of indigenous skills and aesthetics.<sup>37</sup> Under Victor Tardieu's tutelage, his Indochinese students became artists capable of producing “what he considered to be genuine works of art.”<sup>38</sup> Tardieu encouraged students to take pride in and ownership of their work by signing artworks as individuals. They were no longer anonymous artisans. To the French *colons* [settlers] of Indochina, Tardieu's views verged on the radical.

Tardieu's vision may not have been quite the type of *mission civilisatrice* many economic-minded *colons* believed in, but it found fertile ground with other faculty members. Key staff, such as Joseph Inguimberty (Prix Nationale 1924) and Alix Aymé were receptive to and actively engaged with local art and craft traditions, countering anti-colonial critiques of the oppression of indigenous sensibilities. Tardieu's insistence on taking ownership of artworks (and posters) via signature or stamp continued into the revolutionary period. According to Richard di San Marzano, curator of the Dogma Collection, approximately 80 percent of DRV posters are signed and dated by artists.<sup>39</sup> It is not a practice widely seen in other iterations of communist propaganda.

Following Tardieu's death in 1937, Évariste Jonchère (1892–1956), awarded the 1932 Prix de l'Indochine, was appointed the director of the school until it was closed by the Japanese when they ended French rule by coup d'état in 1945. According to Taylor, Jonchère did not share Tardieu's enthusiasm for Vietnamese artistry, claiming that “I have seen the artists in Hanoi and they are artisans, not artists.”<sup>40</sup> According to Nguyễn Phan, Nam Sơn and other faculty teachers worked around Jonchère's attitude and continued with the fine arts mission that Tardieu had established producing some of Vietnam's most acclaimed artists, including Diệp Minh Châu (1919–2002), Phan Kế An (1923–2018), Bùi Xuân Phái (1920–1988), and Nguyễn Sáng (1923–1988).<sup>41</sup>

Through the EBAI and the other art schools, Western skills were handed down through successive generations of Vietnamese artists, who became teachers in these colleges. The celerity of classical techniques such as drawing and gouache, as well as pigment mixing, would prove to be a formidable skill acquisition for artists on the front line or in missions of subterfuge behind enemy lines or during bombardment or in battle. The ability to carry out clandestine

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> di San Marzano, “A Revolutionary Spirit”, n.p.

<sup>40</sup> Chu Quang Tru, *Tranh cổ Việt Nam [Ancient Paintings of Vietnam]*, (Hanoi: Nha Xuất bản Văn Hóa Thoang Tin, 1995), quoted in Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 34.

<sup>41</sup> Nguyễn Phan, “The person who laid the first foundation for Vietnamese Contemporary Fine Art,” *Borrowing Time*, (online): n.p.



mobile acts at speed to avoid capture (reminiscent of contemporary urban graffiti ‘vandalism’) was another ironic consequence of formal French Academy tuition.

Many former students of the EBAI joined the resistance movement setting aside their artistic individualism to pursue the collective independence mission. Nevertheless, their individualism seeps through their work and into the images produced for or directly onto the posters. The subject in the graduates’ artworks migrated from idyllic domestic scenes of girls with lilies and lotuses preoccupied with washing their hair to outdoor scenes in the mountains or by the sea, transformed into warriors with M-16s and AK-47s, who were valued and admired as defenders of the nation (see Figure 36).

In terms of ingrained arts practice, personal loyalties, and a sense of lineage, it would have been virtually impossible to remove the guiding principles and techniques handed down by the French teachers. In turn, the EBAI graduates passed on these principles and techniques to subsequent generations involved in propaganda and art production. Both the French colonialists and the Vietnamese revolutionaries recruited artists to their respective missions and manipulated aesthetics to serve ideological ends. How Vietnamese artists responded to those pressures is a window into the role of creative artists in shaping society and vice versa.

The EBAI is the crucible where Vietnamese tradition and Western modernism was forged, tested, reproduced, reinvented and localised. The EBAI and similar art schools created a forum for the exchange of ideas that were transformative for the students. Faculties included French (and later Vietnamese) teachers whose liberal outlook confronted the prevailing social order and challenged the norms and mores of conservative colonial society. The EBAI was a vortex of modern, exciting, and confronting artistic and social ideas and behaviours.

The fusion of modern Western ideas and Vietnamese traditions was a ‘turning point’ in modern Vietnamese art history, allowing “artists to express themselves within a unique national character and with individual artistic voices.”<sup>42</sup> Vietnamese art historian, Nguyễn Quang Phòng argues that European art traditions provided “all the possibilities to express with faithfulness and subtlety the feelings and soul of Asian Vietnamese painters.”<sup>43</sup> As paradoxical as it is, Vietnamese artists, expertly and broadly trained in Western visual aesthetics, design, and production, and driven by notions of artistic individualism, were involved in the collective independence project of state-sponsored messages that produced an oeuvre of hybrid vigour. Rather than diluting the political message, hybrid vigour enhanced it. Through the agency of artists, Vietnamese propaganda designed to articulate state-sanctioned messages rose above party rote to address a deep cultural need, and, a collective desire.

<sup>42</sup> Shireen Naziree, *From Art to Craft: Vietnamese Lacquer Painting*, (Bangkok: Thavibu Gallery, 2013), 9.

<sup>43</sup> Nguyễn Quang Phòng, *Painters of the Fine Arts College of Indochina*, (Hanoi: NXB Mỹ thuật, 1998), 25.

The legacy of the EBAI is equivocal because the academy curriculum and creative environment equipped artists with European classical aesthetics and techniques, as well as an expressive and emotional sensibility, which were adapted to the Vietnamese revolutionary mission to instil nationalism in the indigenous population, their fellow Vietnamese. The EBAI is a complicated legacy of the French civilising mission and one that the Vietnamese revolutionary project selectively, perhaps adroitly, sidestepped. Ultimately, for all its ambiguity and ambivalence, the self-serving ideology of *mission civilisatrice*, which sponsored the fine arts in Indochina through the EBAI, produced a cohort of expert and lyrical artists that were among the most potent weapons used by Vietnamese revolutionaries to bring down the colonial regime, and to face-off another, even more formidable world power.



**Figure 36** Trần Văn Cẩn (1910–1994), *Coastal Militia Woman*, 1960, Oil on canvas, Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum, Hanoi.

# Conclusion: An ambiguous lineage with hybrid vigour

Can you see that Western painting has some evolving magic  
that can express the complications of our hearts?<sup>1</sup>

Art and politics are inseparable in the history of modern Vietnam, intertwined like the words and images the Vietnamese revolutionary posters used to articulate the inspirations and aspirations of a society in transformation. Traditions of oral poetry, wordplay, and popular culture, along with an integration of poets, wordsmiths, artists and everyday existence were an active part of village life and people's cultural and social lives. Like oral poetry for the predominantly rural population the conflict era posters became the popular mass media of their day. No mere slogan, the message in *Quốc ngữ* was a dynamic educational and doctrinal tool for the DRV. As McLuhan reminds us, the message is in the medium.<sup>2</sup>

In this thesis, I have argued that some of the cultural roots of the Vietnamese visual communication are to be found in the poetic oral traditions of the Vietnamese village, and the visual techniques and traditions of the French Art Academy. This does not deny the influences rooted deeply in Soviet and Maoist propaganda art aesthetics and techniques, many of which also informed the Vietnamese visual communication of the revolutionary period.

This thesis has also argued that the introduction of French aesthetics and techniques was not a graft on to Vietnamese artisanal artistic traditions but an organic process of intense cultural transfer and cross-pollination that created a hybrid style. Nor is it a dilution of Vietnamese cultural production but rather an augmentation or a reinvigoration. In the botanical world, this is called 'hybrid vigour'. The marriage of Vietnamese poetic tradition and French visual modernity as found in the revolutionary poster and the intertwining of slogan and image produced a cultural hybrid with the dynamism that in many respects exceeded its pedigree.

The case for hybrid vigour is driven by a double irony. First, that by reforming the education system and by insisting on the adoption of *Quốc ngữ* as the official written language, albeit for their own propaganda, bureaucratic, and security purposes, the French unwittingly created a vector for Vietnamese revolutionary messaging and communication. Second, that the indigenous artists the colonial authorities allowed to be trained in the fine arts of the West turned their skills, techniques and passion in the struggle against their French masters and mentors. A triste moment, indeed.

<sup>1</sup> Anonymous Vietnamese artist, 1945, quoted in Phoebe Scott, "Forming and Reforming the Artist: modernity, agency and the discourse of art in North Vietnam, 1925–1954," (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2012), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 9.

For their own part, French colonial authorities had used cultural matters to try to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese, but the arbitrary nature of imposition or removal of so-called 'civilising' reforms revealed the asymmetrical relationship between coloniser and colonised. Likewise, the colonial lobby had attempted to seduce the French metropole into believing the imperial dream through spectacle and braggadocio, but the relationship veered from tepid to hostile and disconnected. Ultimately, the brutal realities of hanging on to that imperial dream became a national nightmare.

The historical rupture between the colonial and revolutionary periods was dramatic and abrupt. However, there are overlaps between them and many links were not severed as nationalist historians have claimed. The Vietnamese, famed for their resistance to foreign invaders as immortalised in the wartime visual culture, were inclined it seems to absorb aspects of foreign influence much more readily than is acknowledged. Indeed, Vietnamese across all political horizons often built the new nation-states, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam, on aspects of the colonial model, as much as the French had grafted their concepts of bureaucratic modernity on to Vietnamese tradition. In all cases, it was expedient to do so.

There are continuities and flows that are surprising and ironic. That the Vietnamese actively engaged in the cultural opportunities, rejuvenations and transformations proffered by French intervention only to turn them against them is a deep irony this thesis has relished. Nevertheless, without French agency in the origins of poster production communication between the DRV and its population may not have been as successful. That the outcome of such cultural transfer included revolution is the greatest irony of all.

The individuality of the Vietnamese revolution cannot be characterised by any single thing. Rather it is the multiplicity of things that elucidate its complexity. Acting in concert but without collusion are the forces of history, empires, states, movements, religions, and people. The making of modern Vietnam involved many different actors, protagonists, antagonists and catalysts acting as collectives and individuals. Nor did Vietnamese revolutionary propaganda exist in a vacuum. It was an artful, evolving response to a colonial enterprise that attempted to secure its imperial legitimacy through a self-appointed, *soi-disant* [self-styled] messianic mission to civilise.

Tardieu's involvement cannot be underestimated. Nor can the involvement of his co-founder, collaborator and friend, Nam Son. Together, the two artists and educators were to initiate, develop and transform a small group of dilettante artists into professional artists, with refined and adaptable skills, who held a newfound place in colonial and Vietnamese society. It would be up to political and military leaders, such as Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp to transform these artists into cadres of the state with a revolutionary vision for a better world.

# Epilogue: Artists become soldiers.

“Our hearts beat the same rhythm as our nation.”<sup>1</sup>

Like all Vietnamese during the conflict era, artists played a double role as artist and soldier.<sup>2</sup> As the poster slogan claimed, “*Everyone is a soldier*” (see Figure 8). According to Trần Văn Cẩn, three generations of artists took on the role of soldiers. As participants in a revolutionary epic, they fostered the expression of artistic creativity and patriotic zeal in the next generation in the face of the harrowing reality of war, often enduring terrible fear, suffering and loss.

As we embark on the last stage of this journey, let us go back to the beginning high in the mountains of northern Vietnam. Tô Ngọc Vân’s words echo in the mountain strongholds, “tradition starts now.” That amazing mantra energised a generation of artists to wage war, as Picasso had urged, with paintings.<sup>3</sup>

Entrusted with teaching the principles and fundamentals of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought as much as he was Western classical drawing and painting, Tô Ngọc Vân never lost his belief in the indivisibility of art nor his desire to perpetuate the revolutionary mission.<sup>4</sup> His artistic muse fused with his revolutionary ethos, his *đấu tranh* [struggle]<sup>5</sup> at a momentous moment in history. His legacy and the legacies of Victor Tardieu, Nam Sơn, and all the other teachers, artists, and students live on in the repository of propaganda posters of the Vietnamese revolution. This array of images encapsulates the dreams and hopes of the revolutionary mission and its goals for the Vietnamese nation of peoples. Through all the smoke and mirrors, it was a vision of hope, a dream or a fantasy, perhaps a mirage of that most elusive world of all, utopia.

Despite the whiff of a bygone era and a hint of tourist kitsch popularity, visual propaganda is still a part of the Vietnamese landscape – sometimes in the shadows – finessed by a highly and historically organised machine that is ever prepared to step up to the next, inevitable national crisis looming in the S-shaped land by the South China Sea or, as it is known in Vietnam, the East Asia Sea. The next generation is already waiting in the wings. Everyone is a soldier.

<sup>1</sup> Nguyễn Lê Dung (1948– ), war artist, quoted in di San Marzano, “A Revolutionary Spirit: an introduction to Vietnamese Propaganda Art,” Dogma Collection (online), n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Proctor, “Out of the Mould,” (PhD diss., Sydney University, 2012), 98.

<sup>3</sup> de Menonville, *Vietnamese Painting*, 173.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63.

<sup>5</sup> Meaning ‘struggle’ as the essence of revolutionary, noted in Chapter 4; see Pike, *Viet Cong*, 85.



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German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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French language archive and paper inventory of materials relating to Victor Tardieu.

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Hồ Chí Minh Reference Archive.

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*The Chicago Manual of Style*. 17<sup>th</sup> ed., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

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# Appendix A List of Vietnamese Artists in thesis

The following Vietnamese artists are referenced in this thesis:

Nam Sơn (Nguyễn Văn Thọ, 1890–1973)

Phan Kế An (1923–2018)

Nguyễn Phan Chan (1892–1984)

Đường Ngọc Cảnh (1925–2001)

Lê Phổ (1907–2001)

Nguyễn Bích (1925–2011)

Ho Van Lai (c. 1907–?)

Nguyễn Thu (1930–2018)

Vũ Cao Đàm (1908–2000)

Trình Kim Vinh (1932–)

Nguyễn Gia Trí (1909–1993)

Dương Ánh (1934–)

Trần Văn Cẩn (1910–1994)

Phạm Thanh Tâm (c. 1934–)

Nguyễn Khang (1912–1989)

Nguyễn Hoàng (1943–)

Diệp Minh Châu (1919–2002)

Hoàng Hưng (1946–)

Bùi Xuân Phái (1920–1988)

Nguyễn Lê Dung (1948–)

Nguyễn Sáng (1923–1988)





## Appendix B List of Artists awarded the Indochina Art Prize

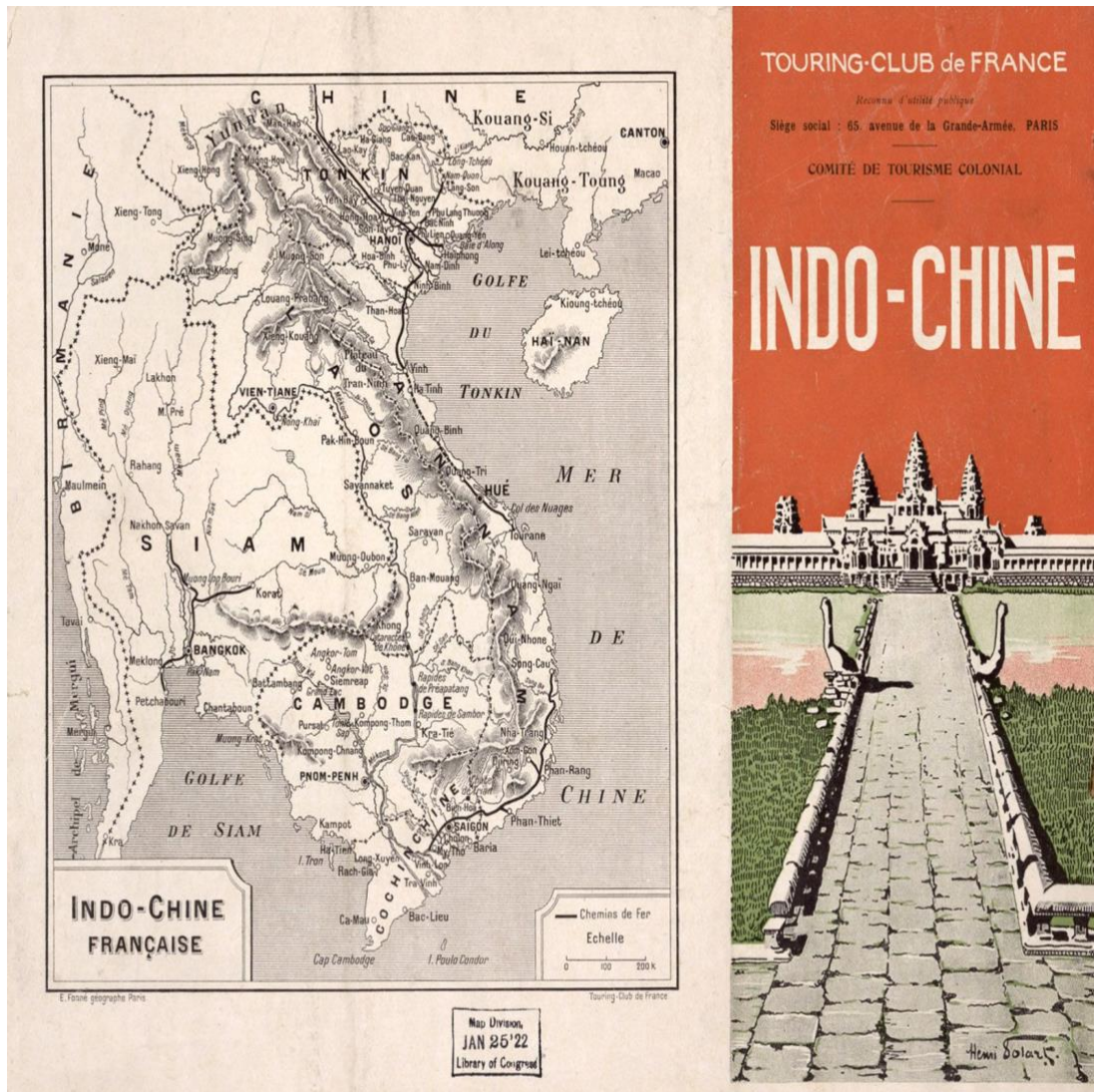
Artists awarded Prix de l'Indochine by the Colonial Society of French Artists between 1910-1938. From 1925, the prize was associated with the EBAI.

1910	Ferdinand Oliver	1926	Paul Legouez
1911	François de Marliave	1927	Raymond Virac
1912	Augustin Carréra	1928	Henri Dabadie
1913	Martinien Salgé	1929	Lucien Lièvre
1914	Charles Fouqueray	1930	Louis Rollet
Award hiatus due to WWI		1931	Léon Félix
1920	Victor Tardieu	1932	Evariste Jonchère
1921	Paul Jouve	Award becomes biannual	
1922	Antoine Ponchin	1934	Georges Barrière
1923	Geo Michel	1936	Jean Despujols
1924	Jean Bouchard	1938	Louis Bate
1925	Jules Besson	Award discontinued due to WWII	



# Appendix C Map of French Indochina, c. 1921

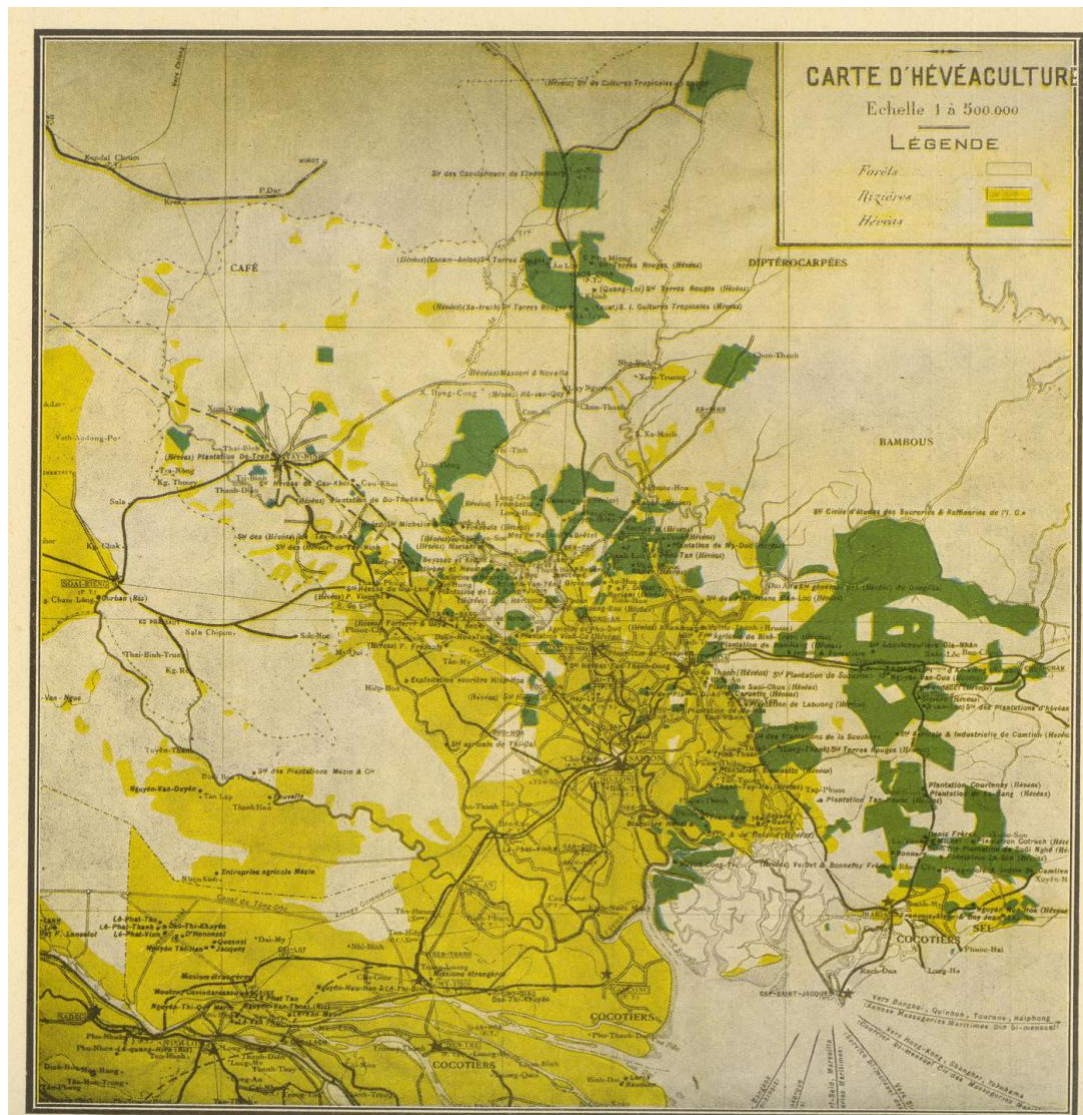
A map depicting France's colony of French Indochina published by the Comité de Tourisme Colonial [Colonial Tourism Committee], c. 1921, the year Victor Tardieu arrived in Hanoi.





# Appendix D Map of plantations in Cochinchina, c. 1931

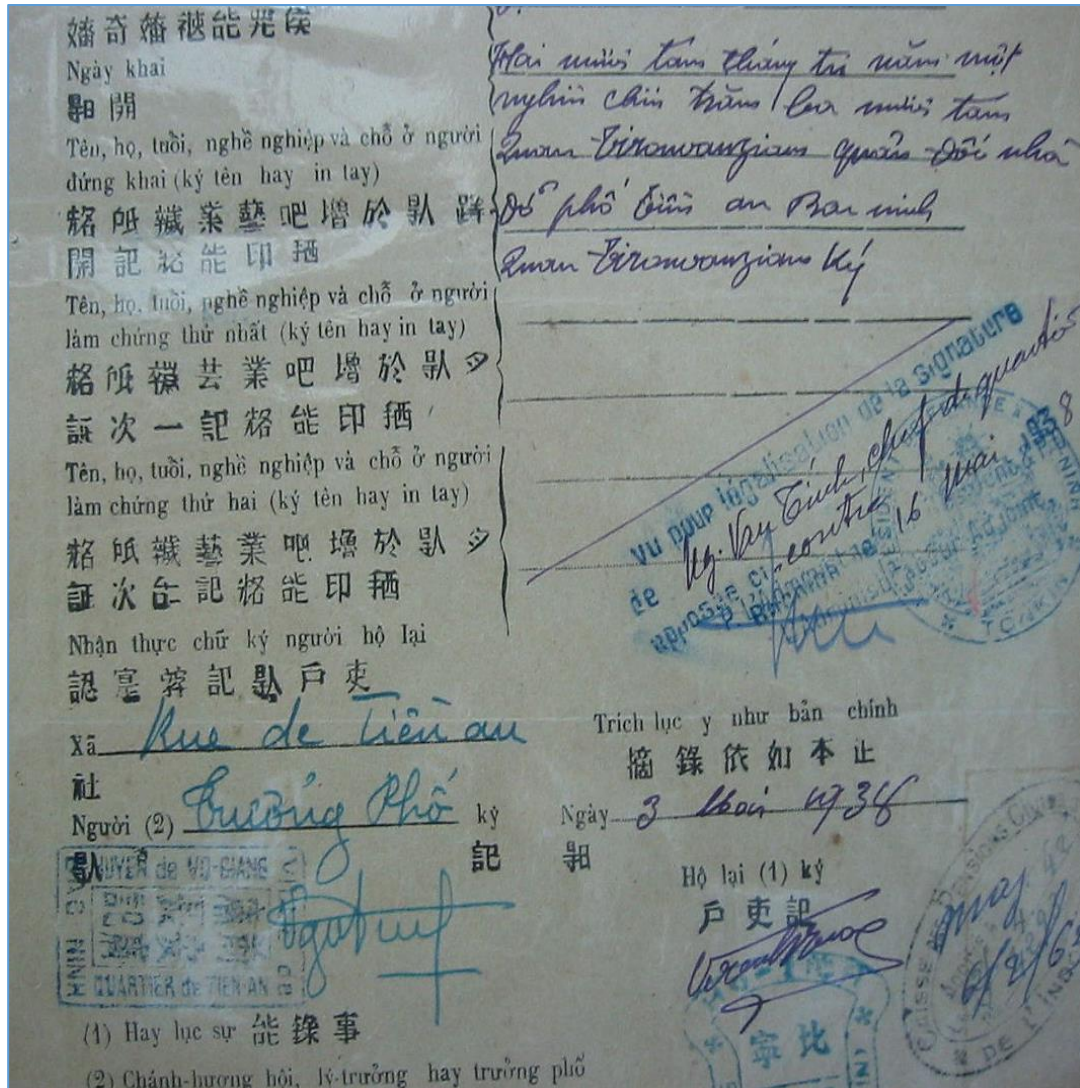
A map showing the forest, rice and rubber plantations around Saigon, c. 1931, courtesy of Belle Indochine.





# Appendix E Multilingual Vietnamese birth certificate, 1938

Vietnamese birth certificate in 1938 showing different scripts, in descending order of acculturation: chữ Quốc ngữ, chữ Nôm, chữ Nho, and French, courtesy of the Hồ Chí Minh Museum, Hanoi.



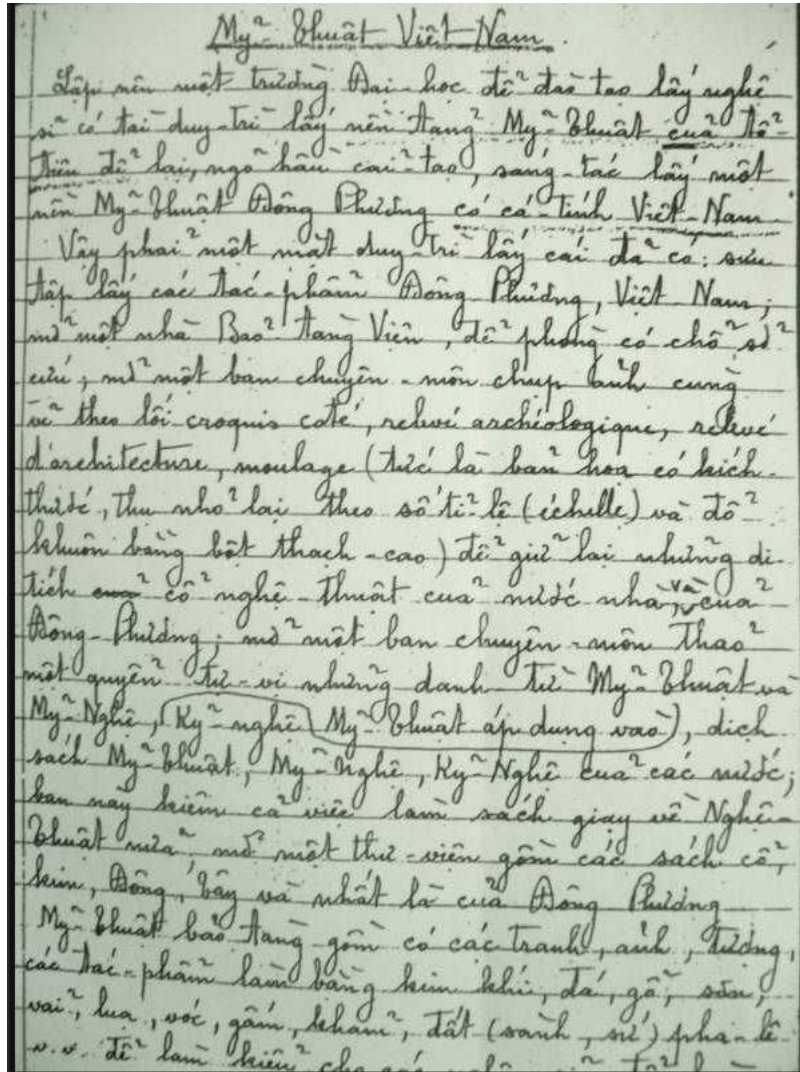




# Appendix F Nam Sơn's blueprint for a Fine Arts School in Vietnam, 1923

A copy of the first page of Nam Sơn's document outlining the structure and pedagogy for a fine arts institution in a Vietnamese context, written in 1923, the year he met Victor Tardieu.

Photograph courtesy of Nguyễn Phan.





# Appendix G “Artist are soldiers” message from Hồ Chí Minh, 1951

The Third National Exhibition of Fine Arts, 1951, Chiêm Hoám, Tuyên Quang, Việt Bắc.

Document source: Marxist Archives.

Ho Chi Minh

## Message Sent To The Artists On The Occasion Of The 1951 Painting Exhibition

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**First Published:** December 10, 1951

**Source:** *Selected Works of Ho Chi Minh Vol. 3*

**Publisher:** Foreign Languages Publishing House

**Transcription/Markup:** Christian Liehl

**Online Version:** Ho Chi Minh Internet Archive ([marxists.org](http://marxists.org)) 2003

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Dear artists,

Being informed of your exhibition, I regret that owing to pressure of work, I cannot visit it; I herewith convey you my fraternal greetings. I take this opportunity of sending for your consideration some view points regarding fine arts.

Literature and arts belong to the same front, on which you are fighters.

Like other fighters, you, in the artistic field, have your own responsibilities — to serve the Resistance, the Fatherland and the people, first and foremost the workers, peasants and soldiers.

To fulfil your tasks, you must have a firm class stand and a sound ideology; in short you must place the interests of the Resistance, of the Fatherland and of the people above all.

With regard to your creative work, it is necessary that you understand, get in touch with and go deeply into, the people's life. Only by so doing, will you be able to convey the heroism and determination of our soldiers and people as a whole and to contribute to the development and improvement of these qualities. Our Resistance has made great progress; our soldiers and people have made big strides forward, so will you, in the artistic field, by means of criticism and self-criticism.

Some of you may think: President Ho tries to turn fine arts into a political matter.

Nothing is more true. Literature and arts, like all other activities, cannot be taken apart from the economic and political fields, but they must be included in them.

Our people's future is most glorious, and the future of our fine arts is very bright. I wish you good health, progress and success in your work.

*Greetings of friendship and*

*determination to win*

*December 10, 1951*

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[Ho Chi Minh Archive](#) | [Reference Archive](#)