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COCHINCHINA UNDER FRENCH COLONIAL RULE (1862–1939)

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Abstract:

This article examines the colonial administration of Cochinchina under French rule between 1862 and 1939, with a focus on its political, economic, social, and cultural transformations. The primary objective is to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of colonial governance and to assess its long-term implications for Vietnam's modern history. Methodologically, the study combines the historical method-reconstructing causes, processes, and outcomes—with the logical method, which identifies structural patterns and underlying dynamics of colonial rule. Comparative analysis, statistical data, and critical evaluation of diverse sources further ensure scholarly rigor. The findings indicate that, politically, the French imposed a regime of direct rule through the Governor of Cochinchina, restructuring administrative divisions to enforce the principle of "divide and rule" and sever ties with the Huế court. Economically, Cochinchina was transformed into a colonial production zone serving the metropole. The first and second colonial exploitation programs (1897 and 1918) consolidated a semi-feudal colonial economy, centered on rice cultivation and export, deeply dependent on France. Socially, new classes emerged, including a nascent bourgeoisie, an urban petty bourgeoisie, and an expanding working class, while tenant farmers faced growing impoverishment. In cultural and educational spheres, French policies combined deliberate obscurantism with selective Westernization, fostering the rise of urban culture, vernacular press, and a new intelligentsia. This study contributes to Vietnamese historiography by systematizing scattered sources, reaffirming the exploitative nature of French colonialism, and highlighting the multifaceted transformation of Cochinchina. It also provides valuable reference material for teaching and further research on colonial Vietnam and the uneven process of modernization under foreign domination.

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1. Introduction

From the perspective of the French political elite, Vietnam in general, and Cochinchina in particular, was a distant land from the metropole with a climate considered unsuitable for French settlement. Consequently, the region was not regarded as a settler colony but rather as an exploitation colony intended to generate profits for France. Cochinchina, moreover, was a fertile and resource-rich territory. Therefore, the French sought every possible means to transform Cochinchina into a colony. By 1867, France had completed its conquest of this land. Thereafter, the colonial authorities implemented political, economic, cultural, and social policies in the region. The presence of the French in Cochinchina fundamentally altered all aspects of this land during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

2. Research Methods

To conduct this study, two principal methods were employed:

- Historical method: This approach examines phenomena and events across specific stages (causes, developments, outcomes, etc.) in order to reconstruct and depict them as they actually occurred. In this work, the historical method is utilized to situate the emergence of colonial rule and to reconstruct French political, economic, cultural, and social policies in Cochinchina during the period 1862– 1939.
- Logical method: This method investigates phenomena in their generalized form, thereby revealing their essence, laws, and the broader tendencies underlying the objective movement of history.

Alongside these two primary approaches, this study also integrates comparative, contrastive, collection, statistical, and documentary analysis methods in order to address the research questions posed.

2.1 Historiography

The topic of French colonial rule in Cochinchina has been addressed by numerous scholars, both Vietnamese and foreign, at varying levels of detail.

Professor Dinh Xuan Lam, in *General History of Vietnam* (Vol. II, Education Publishing House, 2005), examined Vietnam's history from the onset of French domination to the August Revolution of 1945. The author discusses in detail the two colonial exploitation programs, French investment policies, and the divide-and-rule strategy, thereby providing significant insights into the socio-economic and political situation in Vietnam, including Cochinchina.

Professor, Academician Nguyen Khanh Toan (chief editor), *History of Vietnam* (1858–1945), Vol. II (Social Sciences Publishing House) provides a comprehensive

overview of Vietnam's history under French colonialism. Of particular note is Chapter XI, nearly 100 pages in length, which presents the history of the country from 1939 to 1945, including the policy of "command economy" under Franco-Japanese rule.

Associate Professor Ha Minh Hong, in *Modern History of Vietnam* (1858–1975) (Vietnam National University Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 2005), recounts the indomitable struggles of the Vietnamese people against French colonialism, with reference to socio-economic conditions in Cochinchina under French rule.

Nguyen Dinh Le, in *History of Vietnam from 1919 to 1945* (Pedagogical University Publishing House, 2006), provides a detailed account of Vietnam's history, including French colonial policies in Cochinchina.

Nguyen The Anh, in *Vietnam under French Domination* (Literature Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 2008), discusses comprehensively the colonial institutions established by France, the drafting of administrative regulations for the three regions, French capitalist investment in Vietnam, and the living conditions of the Vietnamese under colonial domination up until the August Revolution. When addressing economic activities, the author also refers to French economic policies implemented in Cochinchina. In addition to these general historical works, more recent scholarly conferences have addressed issues specific to Cochinchina's modern history. Notably, the academic conference *Some Issues in the Modern History of Southern Vietnam*, chaired by Professor

Phan Huy Lê in Can Tho (2008), resulted in a published volume by the World Publishing House. Several of the conference papers explicitly discuss French colonial policies in Cochinchina.

3. Research Content

After completing the conquest of the three eastern provinces—Gia Định, Định Tường, and Biên Hòa (1862)—and subsequently the three western provinces—Vĩnh Long, An Giang, and Hà Tiên (1867), the French colonial authorities abolished the Nguyễn dynasty's administrative division. In 1899, the *Six Provinces of Cochinchina* were reorganized into twenty-one provinces. This redrawing of Cochinchina's administrative boundaries was arguably intended to erase the notion of the "Six Provinces" from the consciousness of the Vietnamese people, thereby severing their emotional attachment to the patriotic traditions of Southern Vietnam. This psychological tactic accompanied the harsh repression of anti-colonial movements. Nevertheless, the term "Cochinchina" (Nam Kỳ) continued to be used until 1945.

3.1 Organization of the Colonial Administrative Apparatus

Following the occupation of the three eastern provinces of Cochinchina (Gia Định, Định Tường, Biên Hòa), the French declared the territory to be "land of France" and its inhabitants to be "new subjects of Emperor Napoleon." After the annexation of the three western provinces (Vĩnh Long, An Giang, Hà Tiên), the French formally incorporated the entire Cochinchina into "French Cochinchina" (1867), placing the region under a colonial regime and separating it from the unified Vietnamese state.

Twenty days after the capture of Gia Định citadel, the so-called "period of the Admirals" began, during which the French naval commanders exercised absolute civil and military authority under an extremely harsh dictatorship. This system lasted until 1879, when Le Myre de Vilers was appointed Governor of Cochinchina—the first civil governor—thus ending the era of admiral-governors.

From that point, the French began constructing a colonial administrative apparatus in Cochinchina. The colony was governed under a regime of *direct rule*, headed by the Governor of Cochinchina. Assisting him were the *Colonial Council* and *Provincial Councils*. All provincial chiefs were French officials, while the Vietnamese were regarded as "subjects" of France, with the Huế imperial court having no authority whatsoever in the region.

In 1876, Cochinchina was divided into four major administrative regions, which were then subdivided into districts (*arrondissements*), as follows:

- The Saigon region included five districts: Tây Ninh, Thủ Dầu Một, Biên Hòa, Bà
 Rịa, and Gia Định.
- The Mỹ Tho region included four districts: Mỹ Tho, Gò Công, Tân An, and Chợ Lón.
- The Vĩnh Long region included four districts: Vĩnh Long, Bến Tre, Trà Vinh, and Sa Đéc.
- The **Ba Sac region** included six districts: Châu Đốc, Hà Tiên, Long Xuyên, Rạch Giá, Cần Thơ, and Sóc Trăng.

In 1899, the Governor-General of Indochina issued a decree renaming the *arrondissements* into *provinces* and dividing Cochinchina into three zones:

- The Eastern zone: Tây Ninh, Thủ Dầu Một, Biên Hòa, Bà Rịa.
- The Central zone: Gia Định, Chợ Lớn, Mỹ Tho, Gò Công, Tân An, Vĩnh Long, Bến Tre, Trà Vinh, Sa Đéc.
- The Western zone: Châu Đốc, Hà Tiên, Long Xuyên, Rạch Giá, Cần Thơ, Sóc Trăng, Bac Liêu.

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, Cochinchina consisted of twenty provinces. The Governor of Cochinchina stood at the apex of this apparatus, exercising legislative, executive, and judicial powers, directing authority from the provincial level downward. Significantly, the office of Governor evolved from a military model (*Governor-Admiral*) to a civil model (*Civil Governor*), under the authority of the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies, and later directly subordinate to the Governor-General of Indochina.

In addition, numerous specialized departments were created—such as the Department of Commerce and the Department of Agriculture—to assist the Governor. Similar to Tonkin and Annam, each province was administered by a French *résident* (provincial chief). However, a distinctive feature of Cochinchina was that provincial chiefs were entrusted with the management of land ownership, and provincial financial institutions continued to operate, giving provincial chiefs direct control over provincial budgets—a power absent in Tonkin and Annam. Below the provincial level, the administrative structure of prefectures, districts, and communes remained in place, administered by Vietnamese officials.

In sum, the colonial administrative apparatus established in Cochinchina was the first of its kind in French Indochina. In essence, it was designed to implement France's policy of "divide and rule" and did not differ fundamentally from the colonial governments later established in Tonkin and Annam. It was the archetype of colonial governance, characterized by direct rule and tight control over all aspects of colonial society. Through this apparatus, the French imposed political repression, exploited the economy, and laid the institutional foundation for the "command economy" in Cochinchina during the years 1939–1945.

4.2 Economy

According to Phan Khoang, in his work *History of Vietnam under French Domination*, "The foremost aim of colonial conquest by imperialist powers was material: to find markets for the consumption of their manufactured goods and to secure sources of raw materials essential for their industries" (28, p. 423). Therefore, immediately after seizing Cochinchina from the Huế court—well before the conquest of the entire country—the French began to restructure the economy of Cochinchina along capitalist, export-oriented lines.

Prior to launching the invasion of Cochinchina, French admirals had already been supplied with information by the "Special Committee on Cochinchina" concerning the economic resources of the region, resources expected to greatly benefit French trade in the Far East. According to the Committee, Cochinchina's rice was a particularly lucrative export commodity. For this reason, immediately after occupying Gia Định, French admirals opened the port of Saigon to international shipping and trade. To further exploit the region's commercial potential, they reorganized Saigon, aiming to attract settlers as well as entrepreneurs. On April 11, 1861, Admiral Charner issued a decree for the planning and establishment of the city of Saigon. Alongside urban planning, the French actively encouraged foreign manufacturers and industrialists to settle and conduct business in Cochinchina.

At the same time, the French directed efforts toward exploiting the western part of Cochinchina. Through dredging and canal construction projects undertaken by French engineers, arable land and agricultural yields expanded significantly. In 1868, Cochinchina had 380,000 mẫu tây (a land measure), but by 1938 this figure had risen to 2,650,000 mẫu tây. Rice surplus for export became the region's most important source of revenue.

In 1897, the French formally launched the *First Colonial Exploitation Program* with the "Doumer Program," which was founded on the principle that "*Indochina must be reserved exclusively for the French market*. *Production in the colony should be limited to supplying the metropole with raw materials or goods unavailable in France*. *Any industry encouraged must only serve as a supplement to metropolitan industry, without threatening its primacy*" (29, p. 113).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Cochinchinese economy underwent profound transformations. In 1918, the "Albert Sarraut Program"—known as the *Second Colonial Exploitation Program*—was introduced after the First World War. Its primary aim was to intensify investment and heighten the scale of colonial extraction. Unlike the first

exploitation program, this second phase witnessed increased French capital concentration and investment, first in agriculture, and subsequently in mining, processing industries, commerce, and transportation.

Under this new policy of investment, particularly in agriculture, the French intensified land confiscations, expanded plantations, and drained agricultural surplus for export. In Cochinchina alone, within just ten years after the First World War, an additional 503,300 hectares of land were expropriated, out of a total of 775,700 hectares seized across the entire country.

Thus, French economic policies transformed Cochinchina's economy in both structure and nature. It gradually lost its feudal characteristics and evolved into a semi-feudal colonial economy, with its colonial nature being predominant. From this point, the economy of Cochinchina became structurally dependent on that of the metropole. Cochinchina functioned as both a reservoir of raw materials and a market for French goods. It can therefore be asserted that, under the two phases of colonial exploitation, Cochinchina's economy was reshaped along capitalist lines.

4.3. Society

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the southern frontier was still considered "vast land, sparse population." In 1865, the three eastern provinces of Cochinchina counted approximately 36,000 male inhabitants. At the time of the French conquest of the three western provinces, the population stood at about 447,000. By 1873, the total population of the Six Provinces reached around 1.5 million (19, p. 161).

In the early decades of the twentieth century, population growth in the Six Provinces accelerated significantly. According to statistics of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the population of Cochinchina was about 3.5 million in 1921, and rose to 4.4 million by 1931. French sources record similar figures: in 1929, the population stood at approximately 4.5 million. Data from the French Central Statistical Office confirmed that in 1931 Cochinchina's population was 4,483,000—roughly equal to that of Annam (4,489,000), and about half that of Tonkin (19, pp. 161–162).

On average, Cochinchina's population growth rate in the early twentieth century was higher than the national average. The rapid increase stemmed from two causes: high natural birth rates within the region, and waves of migration from the North. Additionally, a considerable influx of foreigners contributed to this demographic expansion. The largest foreign community was the Chinese, concentrated primarily in Saigon–Gia Định and Hà Tiên. Increasing numbers of French, Germans, and Indians also established residence in Cochinchina.

Population density was uneven. The majority of inhabitants lived in large urban centers such as Saigon–Chọ Lón, Gia Định–Cần Tho, and Hà Tiên, while newly reclaimed lands (notably south of Tây Đô) remained sparsely populated. Under colonial rule and exploitation, Cochinchina experienced social transformations in both rural and urban settings. In the countryside, land seizures by French landlords and their feudal collaborators led to the widespread pauperization of peasants, giving rise to a tenant-farmer class in the South. Landlordism itself diversified beyond its traditional feudal

form, now including French landlords, official-landlords, ordinary landlords, and great landlords who also operated as industrial and commercial capitalists.

By the early twentieth century, Saigon–Chợ Lớn had developed into the largest urban and commercial center of southern Indochina. Other towns such as Biên Hòa and Mỹ Tho also gradually expanded.

Accompanying this urban and industrial growth was the emergence of Vietnam's first bourgeoisie. Some members had close economic ties with the French; others came from wealthy landlord backgrounds and turned to commerce and industry, motivated by opposition to the colonial monopoly. Certain entrepreneurs even began pooling resources to establish joint-stock companies capable of competing with French firms and other foreign capitalists.

Alongside the bourgeoisie, a petty-bourgeois class also developed, especially in Saigon–Chọ Lón, consisting of small traders, shopkeepers, intellectuals, students, civil servants, and service workers. The most numerous were artisans and petty merchants.

In addition, a wage-earning class emerged, including a growing proletariat. Unlike workers in Western capitalist countries, who largely originated from the urban poor, this industrial workforce in Cochinchina consisted primarily of displaced peasants still tied to the countryside and village communities. Although new to factory life, their numbers expanded rapidly. By 1910, Bình Tây Distillery employed about 300 workers; the Ba Son Shipyard employed over 1,000; and the rice mills in Saigon–Chọ Lón together employed around 3,000.

After the First World War, French policies of intensified investment and exploitation resulted in the rapid growth—in both size and organization—of the Vietnamese working class, particularly in Cochinchina.

In summary, by the early twentieth century, Cochinchinese society underwent profound changes. Under French colonial rule, new social strata emerged, including the bourgeoisie, proletariat, and petty bourgeoisie. These classes contributed to the material wealth appropriated by the French. However, when France itself was embroiled in war, colonial authorities in Cochinchina intensified their exploitation, driving the local population into increasing hardship and misery.

4.4 On Culture and Education

The policy of maintaining ignorance in education and poisoning in culture was a consistent strategy of the French colonial authorities during their rule in Cochinchina.

Before 1862, the French did not implement a clear educational policy; they temporarily preserved the traditional Confucian system of learning and teaching. Later, however, they established the School of Interpreters, which taught Quốc ngữ (the romanized Vietnamese script) and French, with the purpose of training administrative personnel at the village, canton, district, and provincial levels to serve as collaborators of the colonial regime. In 1871, the French founded the École Normale (Colonial Pedagogical School), and in 1873 they established the Collège des Stagiaires, aimed at training teachers and colonial officials.

At the beginning of the 20th century, under the governorship of Paul Bert (1905), a program of so-called "educational reform" was introduced, creating three levels of schooling: elementary, primary, and secondary. Subsequently, during the tenure of Governor-General Albert Sarraut, the colonial authorities issued a decree entitled the "General Regulations on Public Education in Indochina" (21 December 1917). These reforms left a significant imprint on the Vietnamese educational system. By 1913, the total enrollment across all three regions—Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina—was only about 100,000 students out of a population of 20 million. By the 1920s, the entire country had only five public secondary schools, three of which were located in Saigon: the Lycée Chasseloup Laubat, the Girls' Secondary School of Saigon, and later the Lycée Petrus Ky; in addition, there were the Collège de Mytho and the Collège de Cantho.

In particular, both primary and secondary schools were required to use French as the language of instruction, with curricula emphasizing French geography and history, France's achievements in Indochina, the organization of French colonial administration in Vietnam, and above all, the duties of colonial subjects toward France, which included:

- Reverence for France,
- Gratitude to France,
- Service to France,
- Loyalty to France.

Such policies and curricula, maintained consistently throughout the French colonial period, aimed at training a class of auxiliaries and collaborators for the colonial administration. As the historian Lê Thành Khôi observed: "The new education was oriented toward assimilation, entirely detached from national traditions, and limited to a small minority who would become subordinate functionaries" (25, p.103).

Alongside the modernization of education along Western lines, the cultural and spiritual life of the Cochinchinese population also underwent rapid transformation. Means of communication and mass media expanded significantly; numerous newspapers and journals, in both Vietnamese and French, appeared. In order to exercise control, the colonial government promulgated press regulations requiring that editors-in-chief and publishers be French citizens or possess French nationality, and that no newspaper could be published without an official license.

Nevertheless, in Saigon–Cochinchina during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several newspapers emerged and were active, such as "Gia Định Báo" (1865), "Nhật Trình Nam Kỳ" (1883), "Nam Kỳ Địa Phận" (1883), "Đại Nam Đồng Văn Nhật Báo" (1892), "Phan Yên Báo" (1898), "Nông Cổ Mín Đàm" (1901), and "Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn" (1907), most of which were owned and managed by the French. Later, some periodicals were established by Vietnamese intellectuals, including "Nam Trung Nhật Báo" (1917) by Diệp Văn Kỳ, "Đại Việt Tạp Chí" (1918) by Hồ Biểu Chánh, and "Nữ Giới Chung" (1918), edited by Sương Nguyệt Anh—the first women's newspaper in Vietnam. Among these, "Nông Cổ Mín Đàm" and "Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn" were progressive in character, strongly promoting the "New Learning", which called for the development of indigenous commerce, agriculture, and industry, the adoption of Western culture and science, opposition to conservatism, rejection of obsolete customs, and resistance to superstition.

Meanwhile, "Nữ Giới Chung" advocated women's rights, equality between men and women, and encouraged women to enhance their knowledge of science, culture, and self-reliance.

Thus, under the dual pressure of French colonial cultural penetration and the influx of Western civilization, Vietnamese culture underwent profound changes. One such change, as contemporaries noted, was that: "Vietnamese culture, which formerly valued the 'Good'above the 'True' and the 'Beautiful', now, under the influence of Western culture, began to prioritize the 'Beautiful' and the 'True' while neglecting the 'Good,' thereby upsetting the equilibrium that had yet to be restored" (28, p.437).

In summary, during the years 1862–1939 in Cochinchina, the French invested in economic exploitation while simultaneously imposing a wide range of political, cultural, and educational policies. Through these measures, they introduced into the region a new, capitalist-oriented mode of production. Although this contributed to certain transformations in the Cochinchinese economy, the system remained tightly dependent on the French metropole. The region functioned primarily as both a source of raw materials and a consumer market for French interests. Consequently, during 1939–1945, when metropolitan France became deeply embroiled in the Second World War, Cochinchina was mobilized as a reservoir of financial and material resources to sustain France's war effort.

5. Contributions of the Research

The colonial policies implemented by France in Cochinchina (1862–1939) exerted profound impacts on this region. Therefore, the study of this topic yields several significant contributions:

Through the careful selection and synthesis of a wide range of sources, this dissertation provides knowledge about colonial governance policies while simultaneously outlining their fundamental effects on Cochinchina during the Franco–Japanese period. In doing so, it helps to clarify the political, social, and economic conditions of Cochinchina under French domination.

By examining French colonial policies in Cochinchina (1862–1939) and their consequences, the research offers scientific insights into the extent and nature of their influence across different aspects of the region's development.

The "portrait" of Cochinchina under French rule (1862–1939), reconstructed in its essential features, serves as a valuable reference for the teaching and study of local history.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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