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The Moral Imperative and the Politics of Confucianism in French Indochina: Vietnamese Strategies of Resistance, Appropriation and Transformation

Jasmin H. Cheung-Gertler

Carleton University, Ottawa. Jasmin H. Cheung-Gertler holds a B. A. (Hon.) from the University of Toronto and is currently an M.A. candidate at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA) at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. Ms. Cheung-Gertler is enrolled in the Human Security and Global Governance module.

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Abstract

The subject of this paper is Confucianism as a political ideology that operated within complex strategies of assimilation, resistance and appropriation in French Indochina. Through an exploration of the ways in which Confucianism was interpreted and appropriated, by both the colonizers and the colonized, I will illustrate how morality, and claims to morality, became political currency for both French imperialist and Vietnamese nationalist and communist endeavors. Fundamental social, ideological, imperial, national and political tensions are implicit

in the vacillating and contradictory policies and attitudes vis-à-vis Confucianism. Nevertheless, I maintain that the moral imperative became an indispensable part of both French imperial and Vietnamese revolutionary rhetoric.

The first half of the paper addresses imperial policies of assimilation, association, collaboration and *mise-en-valeur*, as well as Vichyite federalism and traditionalism, particularly with regard to education. I will examine these in light of their implications for Confucian institutions and ideology. The second half of the paper addresses the intersection of Confucianism with Vietnamese Communism. Continuity and symbiosis, both as ideology and as social import, are given particular emphasis.

Introduction

The subject of this paper is a utilitarian understanding of Confucianism in the context of late 19th and early 20th century French Indochina. Through exploring the various and contradictory ways in which the Confucian ideology was employed, both by the colonizers and the colonized, I shall illustrate the processes and interests whereby claims to morality became used as political currency. The moral imperative became an indispensable part of both French imperial and Vietnamese revolutionary rhetoric as imperial apologias and communist iconoclasm. It is my contention that Confucianism in colonial Vietnam was as much a political as a moral ideology and that it became an integral part of political strategies of assimilation and exclusion - a bulwark of the status quo and a rallying call for change.

The historian of French Indochina and the 1945 Revolution, Pierre Brocheux, asserts that Ho Chi Minh was not so much a Communist or a Nationalist as a Confucian, but rather that he was a Confucian Communist and Nationalist. This brings to the fore the ambiguous and multifarious uses and meanings of "Confucianism." It is this fluidity of meaning, in its intellectual, historical and political manifestations, that has made Confucianism key to the multiple levels of power-politics associated with French colonial rule and the Vietnamese struggle for national emancipation.

Confucianism has variously been lauded and denounced by both French colonists and Vietnamese nationalists. As part of the justification for *la mission civilatrice*, or the French "civilizing mission," Confucian institutions and systems (most visibly manifested by civil-service examinations and village educational structures) were subject to hostile French policies which sought to undermine and diminish their influence. As a conservative social force and bulwark of the imperial status quo, Confucianism and the class of mandarins were appropriated and co-opted into official ideology and strategies such as "divide-and-rule" by the French ruling elite. The policies and ideas of Admiral Decoux's Vichy regime are particularly revelatory, both of existing strategies and as a reorientation of French policy which nevertheless sought many of the same goals as Republican France. Similarly, the history of Vietnamese nationalism and identity with regard to Confucian ideology, institutions and structures has always been fraught with ambiguities. Representations of Vietnamese Communism as an exercise in anti-Confucianism fail to accord with the composition of Vietnamese Communist leadership, the majority of whom

were derived from the scholar-gentry elite of Vietnamese society, who were the keepers of the Confucian canon of the Sino-Vietnamese tradition.[1] Vietnamese Communism was arguably as much in the tradition of the Vietnamese Confucian scholar-patriot as it was a reproduction of Marxist-Leninism. Through an analysis of the ways in which Confucianism was interpreted and appropriated, both by the colonizers and the colonized, a political discourse emerges that posits morality within broader strategies of political legitimacy and nation-building. Just as Confucianism and French Imperialism were not always diametrically opposed, so Confucianism and Communism could make co-operative bed-fellows.

Confucianism and French Imperialism

The French colonial project in Southeast Asia was characterized by inherent, destabilizing contradictions which found expression in the quick turnover of official policies and ideologies over the relatively short period of French imperial rule from the mid 19th to mid 20th centuries. The educational policies of the French colonial regime, vis-à-vis policies of assimilation, association, *mise-en-valeur* and the Vichyite National Revolution, are particularly illuminating with regard to the "tensions of empire" which anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler describes as a relationship of "inclusionary impulses and exclusionary practices." [2]

Film critic and social historian Panivong Norindr writes of the discrepancies between the Enlightened ideals of the French Republic and the prerogatives of imperial France. The contradiction between the liberal aspiration to "raise all peoples to an equality of mind" and pedagogical practices predicated on exclusion were not lost on those defending French colonialism in Southeast Asia. Norindr writes: "the only solution was to provide natives ... with a different type of education, one that would not foster liberal ideas." [3] The internal contradictions of colonial education represent the self-defeating justifications of and rationales for French imperialism. Immediately following the period of conquest and pacification (1860-1890), France sought a broader, more appealing and ethically sound basis for its imperial power than physical might and international power-politics. [4] Nicola Cooper writes of the "French colonial ideal .. [as] a conception of colonial expansionism which sought to coincide and accord with Republicanism and humanitarianism, whilst simultaneously ... [renewing] French grandeur and prestige." [5] This was the ideal of *mise-en-valeur*:

a term which connotes not only economic development ... but also the moral and cultural improvement to be wrought in the colonies ... the moral and cultural dimension stemmed from the French belief in the universal value of its civilization. [6]

This vision of an altruistic French motherland endeavoring to "share the benefits of French civilization" hinged upon a devaluation of traditional Vietnamese society and culture. [7] In this respect, the traditional Confucian mores and structures of social organization were denigrated as the source of social decline and the "thousand-year-old torpor of the Asiatic world." [8] The words of Leon Perrier, Minister of Colonies, at the 1928 inauguration of the Indochina House in Paris are particularly representative of this official discourse and its concomitant educational

strategies:

As soon as he enters the French school-room, the young school boy has the impression of entering another world ... One speaks to him of France as a divine guardian; one liberates his soul from ancestral terrors ... communicates to him a confidence in the future and a sense of progress to replace the tedious effort at memory which had paralyzed the intellectual activity of his race.[9]

Perhaps Perrier's rhetoric can best be explained by a brief foray into Hegelian thought, a pillar of the Western "Enlightened" tradition. Here, a metaphysical chain-of-being mimics the hierarchy of civilizations and the Scottish Enlightenment to underscore an "oriental despotism" that precludes human progress and parity with European man:

No one can take an accurate survey of the different nations of Asia ...without remarking the near approaches they make to the same stage of civilization...Of some of the oldest nations...we acquire a practical ...knowledge, by our acquaintance with a living people, who have continued on the same soil...of those ancient nations, partake of the same manners, and are placed at...the same stage in the progress of society...The sagacity of Adam Smith induced him...to deny...any high attainments among those ancient nations...The opinion by which he supports his disbelief of the ancient civilization of Asia is at once philanthropic and profound;..."despotism" is more destructive...and adverse to the progress of the human mind, than anarchy itself.[10]

In *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, David G. Marr argues that Confucianism and Sino-Vietnamese village schools, as the source of such "ancestral terrors," stood in the way of the *mission civilatrice*. The schools themselves were subject to concerted efforts between 1919 and 1927 to eradicate traditional educational practices.[11] This particular breed of "philanthropic" cultural imperialism, endorsed by the assimilationist *mise-en-valeur* impulse, was, however, balanced and occasionally over-ridden by more pragmatic interests. Association, a reorientation of colonial policy which intended "native customs, institutions and organization to be respected as far as possible" was officially sanctioned in 1917.[12]

However, it is my contention that this policy cannot be adequately understood divorced from its more utilitarian incarnation: collaboration. French administrative control relied significantly on the collaboration of the Vietnamese mandarin elite.[13] In this respect, the Confucian system of social hierarchy and social control was an invaluable bureaucratic resource. The potential for Confucian ideas and organization to serve as a bulwark the French imperial status quo resulted in a French language curriculum which seemed to represent contradictory objectives to "impart French cultural and behavioral norms, to reinforce Vietnamese traditional morality, and to teach students how to read basic instructions and talk properly to their colonial masters." [14]

Collaboration, then, only went so far. Collaboration was not egalitarianism. It follows that strategies vis-a-vis Confucianism became a means through which to simultaneously include the

scholar-gentry in the institutions of imperial control while maintaining the spheres of difference justifying exclusionary practices. Morality, in other words, could operate both to include and exclude. French officials invoked the threat of moral crises in order to curtail the social and political activism of Indochinese students in Paris in the 1930s and to justify their expulsion from the metropole.[15] Norindr cites the official rhetoric of the colonial department under Francois Pietri, to which, paradoxically, can be attributed the first articulation of the edifying liberal imperial aspiration to "raise all peoples to an equality of mind":

The Indochinese who come to Europe ... undergo a rapid transformation ... When they are not content to absorb the ... education which is given them and make themselves guilty of acts against public order, it is in their interest that they be returned to their natural milieu, where familial influence and influence of their ancestral tradition can aid them to emerge from ... crisis ...[16]

The "ancestral terrors" had been transformed and reiterated as a benevolent and utilitarian "ancestral tradition." French policies monitoring the flow of Vietnamese students to the metropole vacillated from the liberality of Governor-General Varenne to the draconian restrictions of his successor, Pierre Pasquier.[17]

The emphasis on morality instruction in the 1920s is emblematic of the contradictions of French colonial policy, which translated into an ambiguous and pragmatic attitude towards traditional Confucian ideas and institutions. The Confucian concern for social mores and the emphasis on morality as the basis of social order, was heightened in the 1920s by the turbulent changes associated with colonial rule and modernity. Marr writes: "The clash between old and new, East and West, collaborator and anticolonial, rich and poor, urban and rural, was tangible, and people had no certainty about what they should do in these circumstances." [18] French imperial conquest disrupted the traditional correlation between heaven and monarch, as embodied in the "Mandate of Heaven." [19] The Confucian literati sought moral justification and an ethical framework from which to understand contemporary events. [20] The French colonial government exploited this moral disquiet through policies that embodied both ideals of assimilation and association. Appealing to those members of the literati who were disillusioned with Confucian prescriptions, the French pushed their own moral ideas onto the colonial populous by importing and translating metropolitan textbooks on *morale* to be incorporated into the colonial curriculum. [21] These policies corresponded to the civilizing mission as well as the prerogatives of association and collaboration. Those Vietnamese who welcomed Western philosophy were more easily co-opted into the French paternalistic vision. [22]

Ironically, however, assimilationist policies were promoted and carried out in ways that clearly sought justification and legitimation in Confucian terms. The French understood that the Vietnamese elite required "moral as well as material reasons for active participation." [23] The moral defense of collaboration was constructed through mimicry of Confucian paternalism: France became father, teacher and protector to the Vietnamese son who responded with filial piety, gratitude and diligence.

The Vietnamese collaborationist elite also adapted and stretched Confucian dogma to create a quasi-Confucian collaborationist morality that balanced the French pretense of virtue with the more pragmatic promise of self-interest.[24] Marr's utilitarian interpretation of the classic Confucian dichotomy of "righteousness/profit" whereby "freedom was dependent on becoming strong, wealthy and learned" speaks to the "element of calculation ... [and] qualified ... loyalty" that coloured traditional models of Confucian filial piety.[25] Regardless, the French father was not troubled by the opportunism of his children-mandarin collaboration was too important for French rule to quibble over questions of sincerity. Thus, the French acquiesced to Pham Quynh's "prescriptions of moral-educational-cultural renaissance" promoting the return to orthodox Confucian moral principles or the "national essence" (*quoc tuy*) of Vietnam.[26] Furthermore, the French colonial government cast a blind eye to the 1932-33 campaign to model Emperor Bao Dai as a Confucian moral exemplar. French tolerance might have been assisted by the campaign's cautious qualification of ultimate French authority, but might also be understood in the context of the interests of collaboration.[27]

The best, most persuasive example of the intersection of Confucian mores with the interests of the French imperial project is the Vichy regime (1940-1944). Under Marshal Petain, and his colonial administrator, Admiral Decoux, the National Revolution was transformed and reinscribed into the colonial context as a facsimile of, and companion to, traditional morality. The official motto of the Vichy regime, "*Travail, Famille, Patrie*" was promoted as a blending of Western and Eastern canons which demonstrated the "enlightened" and "rational" character of the new French administration.[28] The historian Eric T. Jennings writes of a "Machiavellian conflating of Vietnamese traditionalism and Vichyite *volksism* [which] would become a cornerstone of National Revolutionary propaganda in Indochina." [29] Collaborationist propaganda and editorials spun out reams of rhetoric promoting the harmonious symbiosis between Confucian morality and Vichyite reaction:

The new French maxim strongly resembles a Confucian one ... is akin to the four essential duties taught by Confucius ... individual improvement, the family nucleus, the government, and the pacification of the universe. From now on, the maxim of the new France is our own.[30]

Petaín, himself, became "Confucius reincarnated": the man who would be "to the West what Confucius was to the East." [31]

Vietnamese schoolchildren were encouraged to rediscover their cultural heritage through a "re-education in 'authenticity'." [32] These educational policies were part of a "Vichy-style federalism" which encouraged the teaching of the "rich folklore" of the five countries of Indochina.[33] Jennings writes: "In the realm of youth indoctrination ... Vichy planners plotted the rebirth of Khmer, Viet, and Lao cultures, closely tied in their eyes with Indian and Chinese traditions respectively." [34] Admiral Decoux's Vichy youth camps included a "new mandarin training curriculum." [35]

For all this utopian harmony between the Occidental and Oriental worlds, the underlying

motivations of the Vichy regime were the same as those of Republican France: differences of ideology were subsumed under the unifying prerogatives of Empire. Petainist policies promoting a return to traditionalism, and the conflating of Petainism as a kind of neo-Confucianism, remained within the ambit of collaboration. Vichyite "federalism" was promoted as a "third path between assimilation and association" and epitomized the culmination of French imperialism. [36] It sought, as the Vichy newspaper *l'Echo annamite* proclaimed, to provide a "moral and intellectual element" which would cement "a true collaboration between colonizers and colonized." [37] Admiral's Decoux's "native policy" was designed, through egalitarian measures which would give indigenous elite greater access to, and equality within, the bureaucratic hierarchy, to revalorize the status of notables. [38] This edified mandarin class could then serve as a vehicle for a new Petainist social order. Jennings writes that under the Vichy regime "mandarins were transformed from the scapegoats of Third Republican colonialism into the ... embodiment and conveyors of Vichy traditionalism." [39]

The smokescreen of Confucian traditionalism obscured the autocratic nature of Decoux's administration which Marr likens to that of the "colonizing French admirals of the 1860s." [40] Underlying the Vichy concern for social order and stability was the disquieting realization that they themselves had become colonized in Europe. [41] The German occupation of France and the threat of the Japanese occupation of Indochina redoubled the colonial imperative of maintaining the social order. [42] The mandarin elite and the conservatism of Confucian morality became allies in the Vichy regime's struggle to maintain a tenuous sovereignty.

The French colonial regime's changing attitudes and policies towards Confucianism and the mandarin elite illustrate the fundamental tensions of imperialism, particularly of the altruistic, humanitarian and enlightened imperialism which France-in both its Republican and Vichyite incarnations-sought to embody. The vacillating educational policies vis-à-vis Confucian institutions and ideas speak to a self-defeating attempt to square the circle of assimilation and association, denigration and valorization, and a morality of inclusion and exclusion; thus underscoring the ultimate fallacy of *mise-en-valeur* in French colonial Indochina.

Confucianism, Vietnamese Nationalism and Communism

If Confucianism revealed the uneasy ambiguities of French colonialism, it was no less subversive for indigenous Vietnamese society. An analysis of the utility and influence of Confucian thought and institutions for the Vietnamese revolutionary and Communist movements must begin with an understanding of Vietnamese history and traditional forms of resistance. Vietnamese culture and identity are defined by the creative tensions and hybridity resulting from a history of conquest and resistance. [43] Chinese imperialism and imperial aspirations, beginning from the third century B.C. and culminating in ten centuries of Chinese rule between the Han and T'ang dynasties, are central to an understanding of Vietnamese national identity. [44] As David G. Marr asserts:

Paradoxically, group identity may be understood best in terms of group differentiation. In other words, groups seldom ponder their commonality actively

until faced with internal cleavage or the menace ... of outside intervention ... the historian of Vietnam is repeatedly struck by the degree to which the Vietnamese have tended to define themselves in terms of their neighbors.[45]

The creation myth of the Vietnamese people describes national descent from the progeny of a union between a dragon and a fairy.[46] Nguyen Van Ky explains in his revisionist examination of Vietnamese folklore and oral history, that this mythical union is indicative of two antithetical traditions, which he frames as the binary opposition of a Chinese patrilineal and indigenous Vietnamese matrilineal social order.[47]

These hybridities and tensions vis-à-vis the Vietnamese relationship with China are reflected in the history of Vietnamese ideas, cultural and literary forms, and in strategies of resistance. Marr's interpretation of this creation myth speaks to a recurrent and persuasive theme running throughout Vietnamese history, which is reflected in literary traditions and archetypes: "This may have been the ideal Vietnamese image of their relationship to the Chinese: dependent on the same sources ... same roots, yet with an independent history that ... gave China no right of political hegemony." [48]

Throughout the ten centuries of Chinese imperial rule, and the succeeding nine centuries of autonomy within the Chinese cultural world, Vietnam retained a remarkable degree of distinctiveness.[49] John T. McAlister and Paul Mus write of the strength of the Vietnamese "unyielding sense of ... identity":

From the very beginning and from the very depths of themselves they must have escaped from the official formalism that had been characteristic of Chinese civilization.[50]

C.P. FitzGerald argues that the separate character and identity of the Vietnamese derived in part from Chinese strategies of imperial rule which depended, not on Chinese immigration from the North, but on rule by Chinese officials. Imposing rule upon a nation of rice-farming peasants, through establishing Chinese-style institutions in Vietnam, was relatively easy and did not require Chinese imperial settlement. Therefore, although Vietnamese culture assimilated many Chinese influences, "the ethnic character of the people continued to be ... 'Viet' and they inherited and cherished that consciousness of difference in race and desire for separate nationhood." [51] The Chinese rulers found that it was more economical to permit the indigenous leaders to become landlords in the Chinese landlord-tenant model of social organization.[52] These landlords were educated in and were encouraged to adopt Chinese customs and ideas, among which Confucianism factored largely, and this allowed them to gain positions in the imperial civil service.[53] Revolts against Chinese rule, in early Vietnamese history, were seldom led by the gentry but by the peasants.[54] Thus, it was this system of absentee and delegated imperial authority that lies at the root of one of the fundamental characteristics and paradoxes of Vietnamese society, namely the traditional power and equally traditional alienation of the Sinified landlord scholar-gentry vis-à-vis the peasantry.[55] Marr argues that the appropriation of Chinese learning, and particularly of Confucian models, could be used as a weapon against their own people. Through organizing orthodoxy campaigns to uphold the "five social

relationships," Vietnamese elites sought to represent rigid Confucian hierarchies as the "natural order of human existence." [56] Their denunciations were largely politically, rather than ethically, motivated.

Confucian models and ideas, however, were not exclusively draconian influences, nor were moral codes merely a fraudulent smokescreen for bureaucratic abuses. Marr argues that the traditional elite did conceive of itself primarily in intellectual and moral terms. [57] The basis of their legitimacy and power among the peasantry was an "implied moral covenant" whereby the mandarins upheld the "soul" (*linh hon*) and "spiritual locus of society" in times of crisis. [58] It is such moral rectitude that motivated the influential minority of scholar-gentry of the early 20th century, such as Phan Boi Chau, to resist collaboration with the French ruling classes. [59] Confucianism and the Sinified scholar-gentry have therefore been variously associated with reactionary conservatism and collaboration with foreign imperial powers as well as with a patriotic concern for social reform and national virtue. Marr writes of this class of educated elite:

Over the next few centuries [following the first century rebellion led by the Trung sisters] a hybrid elite seems to have developed, drawing heavily on Chinese culture and political precedent, yet also prone to defending its own interests rather than those of the faraway Chinese court. [60]

The founding of the Le dynasty (1428-1788 AD) illustrates the paradoxical marriage between Confucian doctrines and Vietnamese nationalism. Le Loi's 1428 proclamation which reestablished in "vigorous, aggressive prose" Vietnam's separateness from China also incorporated "most Chinese classical and imperial symbols as implicit legitimization by Le Loi of his ... new dynasty." [61] Furthermore, Le Loi chose not to obliterate the collaborator mandarin families but rather allowed them to "buy their way back from annihilation." [62] Alexander Woodside's definition of the "two traditions" [63] of the Vietnamese Nguyen monarchy is illustrative of these social contradictions and ambiguities. He argues that the Nguyen court was influenced by two streams of thought: Chinese Confucian hierarchy, as represented by an early 19th century educational primer entitled "Twenty-four Stories of Filial Piety" (*Nhi Thap Tu Hieu*); and a "mythopoeic and religious" ideology, represented by the "Anthology of the Spirits of the Departed of the Vietnamese Domain" (*Viet Dien U Linh Tap*). [64] The latter encompassed a belief in a congruity between spiritual and material worlds manifested by the transgression of these boundaries by dead heroes, the virtues of whom were expressed by contemporary Vietnamese rulers. [65] This pantheon of heroic "un-dead" included the Trung sisters, an eighth-century rebel leader who fought against T'ang Chinese rule, agrarian deities and "an early, autonomous Chinese governor of Vietnam ... who had brought higher Chinese culture to the Vietnamese people." [66] The ideal Vietnamese ruler, as conceived by this dual monarchical tradition, had to encompass characteristics of rebel, guardian of agrarian and social stability, and Confucian scholasticism. [67]

Vietnamese literary traditions and archetypes speak to the integration of Chinese culture and the ways in which Chinese Confucian models and forms, including its human manifestation in the class of scholar-gentry, were appropriated, reinscribed and transformed within discourses of

Vietnamese nationalism. Marr argues that the scholar-elite "tended to detach Chinese thoughts and practices from their original contexts ... picking and choosing whatever met their fancy as Vietnamese," thereby creating specific interpretations of, and uses for, classical thought.[68] The satiric, political poetry of Cao Ba Quat (... - 1854) is particularly representative of what Woodside calls a "romantic tradition in Vietnamese political literature." [69] Quat was considered to be one of the literary stars of his time and his failure to pass the metropolitan examinations attributed to an "insolent wit and skeptical individualism." [70] His verses embodied the fruitful symbiosis of Chinese Confucian and literary forms with social criticism and Vietnamese cultural resistance:

The ideological premises of the Sino-Vietnamese bureaucracy were more likely to be assailed in Vietnam than they were in China. Yet they were often assailed, ironically, by Chinese literary references, which writers like Quat employed as political variables independent of ... their usual narrowly orthodox contents.[71]

Quat was particularly prophetic in his portrait of a true Vietnamese iconoclast, which illustrated the deep-seated and Confucian belief in the moral and social leadership of the scholar-gentry: There is a man: his appearance is wretched but he belongs to a noble family ... His mouth still smells of milk [from his mother] ... The freshness of his student's countenance is apparent; he opens his eyes, recognizes the world, and [just dares to] kick the doors of his masters. Shamelessly summoning up the courage of the vagabond, he stretches out the hand created for him to change the direction of destiny.[72]

It is this simultaneous propensity both for cultural resistance and assimilation that has most defined Vietnamese society and culture, and it is as a product of this creative tension that an understanding of Vietnamese Confucianism, not to mention Vietnamese Communism and nationalism, must be derived.

From this understanding of balanced tensions and hybridities emerges the paradoxical relationship of the Vietnamese nationalist and Communist movements with Confucian ideas, institutions and models. In many respects, these movements were antagonistic to the Confucian status quo. By the turn of the century, French administrative and educational reforms had seriously corroded the Confucian ideology and the social institutions of Vietnamese social life. [73] This decline, coupled with growing dissatisfaction with repressive colonial rule and disgust at the behavior of the "collaborator mandarins" [74] was manifested in a new generation of scholar-patriots, who, although derived from the mandarin class, rejected the past in favour of reform along Western lines.[75] This generation, of which Phan Boi Chau was the most influential[76], was influenced by the legacy of the "obdurate, militant, idealistic scholar-gentry" who had led the *Can Vuong* Movement against the incursion of French imperial power in the 1880s.[77] Phan Boi Chau's decision to choose a career in revolution over a bureaucratic career was representative of his rejection of Confucian standards of success and led him to found a revolutionary movement to create a constitutional monarchy modeled after the Japanese Meiji Restoration.[78] Woodside notes that a Vietnamese proverb reads: "If one man becomes an official, his whole lineage can depend upon him." [79] In 1938, the Vietnamese novelist Khai

Hung's critique of the traditional Vietnamese family was published entitled "The Family" (*Gia Dinh*).[80] The family, as an integral part of the Confucian social order, represented the proper relationship between state and subject; to attack the family then, was to undermine the very basis of political power and legitimacy, i.e. the collaborationist Hue court.[81] Peter Zinoman, in his analysis of the significance of the prison experience for the emergence of Vietnamese nationalism and communism, writes of the phenomenon embodied by the verse "fortune lost, family dispersed" (*tang gia bai san*).[82] Prisoners, who had been forced to leave their families and wives, experienced a very literal family betrayal when their wives abandoned their marriages to live with other men.[83] This, together with other social forces at work in the prisons contributed, in the inter-war years, to a broad-based social movement rejecting the traditional family.[84] Collective imprisonment, Zinoman argues, was a great catalyst for the activism and iconoclasm of the years leading up to the revolution.[85]

It is important, however, not to take this anti-Confucianism at face value, or to deny the part that Confucian ideology and traditions played in early Vietnamese resistance. Part of the potency and strength of feeling characteristic of the "first" generation of scholar-patriots at the turn of the century was derived from their intimate knowledge and absorption of Confucianism. For although, as Marr articulates, Confucian dogmatism and traditionalism was not "the regime most conducive to a 'soft entry' into the twentieth century," the political character of the doctrine intensified dissatisfaction with colonial dominance:

Confucianism being perhaps the most politically oriented of any historic world doctrine. Man's strengths and weaknesses as a political animal were abundantly evident to readers of the classics ... With servitude staring them in the face, they began searching actively outside their own traditions for alternative methods and ideas ... [86]

Furthermore, the prerogatives of moral leadership among the scholar-gentry motivated resistance and opposition. The decisions made by leaders of the *Can Vuong* Movement are representative in this regard, as these were not a repudiation of Confucian social values and conservatism but, rather, Confucian decisions:

But mandarins choosing to fight ... retained the monarchist ideal and ... the confidence that they were neither betraying their forefathers nor leaving a besmirched reputation for their descendants ... they had to make agonizing Confucian choices between staying behind to protect family tombs and elderly parents and sallying forth to defend king and country, a choice that in itself would advance the development of modern patriotic norms.[87]

As the well-known story of Nguyen Trai-who begged to follow his mandarin father into servitude in China, but was instructed to stay at home to protect his country-attests, to save one's country is also virtuous.[88]

Thus, the emergence of organized Vietnamese resistance and political movements in the 1920s

must be understood within this wider tradition, in which Confucianism factored largely. The petty bourgeois intelligentsia, from which sprung the seeds of the revolution, was largely composed of people whose family histories reflected the tradition of mandarin resisters.[89] Anti-French nationalist organizations, such as the *Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang* (VNQDD) in Tonkin, and the *Tan Viet* (New Revolutionary Party) in Annam, drew its support from this traditional elite.[90] However, by the mid-1920s, these nationalist groups had largely become ineffectual due to internal fractures and division. Historian William J. Duiker argues that although part of the problem lay in the legacy of bureaucratic interest groups and secret societies, more serious was the disintegration of Vietnamese national identity which accompanied the collapse of Confucian institutions. The erosion of Confucianism cut the emotional bonds that had traditionally tied intellectuals with the rural masses, thereby undermining the ability of first generation urban nationalists to create broad-based anti-colonial alliances premised on a unifying common ideology.⁹¹

Perhaps no other learned the lessons from the failures of the Vietnamese nationalist movement so well as Ho Chi Minh.⁹² Known in his earlier years as Nguyen Sinh Cung, Ho Chi Minh recognized the importance of ideology, and specifically moral ideology, for successful revolution.⁹³ He understood that when the opportunity arose again for another attempt at emancipation, it would be ideology, a moral imperative allied to revolutionary utility, that would be decisive.

Ho Chi Minh was, like many before him, a product of the scholar-gentry class.⁹⁴ His father had been an official in the imperial bureaucracy during the early years of French rule. However, his dislike for the "slavish" relationship of the Hue court caused him to leave this position and become an itinerant scholar.⁹⁵ Ho Chi Minh's father's novel and reformatory attitudes towards the Confucian canon underscored an unorthodox education for his son which favoured the "inner ethical content of Confucian philosophy" over formal study of the classics.⁹⁶ This was supplemented by patriotic stories recounting the exploits of Vietnamese historic heroes.⁹⁷ Duiker argues that these formative influences had a large impact upon Ho Chi Minh's world-view and would come to factor largely in his particular breed of Marxist-Leninism.

The Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League (*Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Mang Dong Chi Hoi*) had as its primary objective, not the realization of a Communist society, but the creation of a mass nationalist party which derived its support from all progressive classes in Vietnam.⁹⁸ The League, in its publications and pamphlets, attempted to appeal to Vietnamese nationalism and to the scholar-gentry elite as its motivating force.⁹⁹ Communism, was arguably, a means to an end. It was the potential of Marxist-Leninist ideology, which Ho Chi Minh found in reading Lenin's "Thesis on the National and Colonial Questions" to provide the unifying ideology necessary for a successful bid for nationhood, that motivated the rise of the Vietnamese Communist movement.[100]

Communism, however, did not and could not erase the legacy of Vietnamese social patterns and ideas that were, in many ways, a product of creative tensions and hybridities vis-à-vis China and its ideological export, Confucianism. Duiker draws parallels between the Chinese and

Vietnamese Revolutions:

The comparison with China is irresistible and persuasive: The early leaders of the CCP were most likely to be intellectuals descended from rural scholar-gentry families, while those of the rival Kuomintang tended to come from commercial families lacking a traditional Confucian background.[101]

Similarly, over ninety percent of members of the League were from the urban petty bourgeoisie and a high percentage of the leadership were, like Ho Chi Minh, from families with strong Confucian traditions.[102] This trend can be understood in geographical terms as the majority of early Vietnamese Communists were from provinces in the Center or the North where the Confucian cultural heritage remained stronger than in the Westernized and commercialized South.[103]

How, then, to reconcile this strong and pervasive Confucian influence with the rise of Vietnamese Communism ... Ostensibly, Marxism and Confucianism are antithetical traditions:

Where Confucianism is built on a ... static conception of human society, Marxism is dynamic and ... progress-oriented; where Confucianism deprecate[s] material wealth as an obstacle to ... ethical standards, Marxism glorifies the productive process and views man as a natural creator; where Confucianism is fundamentally hierarchical ... Marxism is ... egalitarian ... [104]

One rationale is that it is precisely the anti-Confucian character of Marxism that was the source of its appeal among the young off-spring of the mandarin class who had witnessed the failure of Confucian systems to prevent French imperialism as well as the collusion of the mandarin bureaucracy with the colonial regime.[105] Marr writes that those intellectuals who responded to "proletarianization" were "not only following Comintern encouragement but also trying to prove that their bourgeois and feudal upbringing could be thrust aside." [106]

However these ostensible antagonisms belie a number of ways in which the ideologies are similar and mutually reinforcing. Confucianism shares with Communism a monotheistic vision of a single truth articulated through "quasi-sacred texts," the concept of "an anointed elite" charged with leading the masses through political and intellectual indoctrination, an emphasis on individual morality and service to society, the subordination of the individual to community, the belief that material gain should be subordinated to uplifting goals (rather than the motivating objective of human endeavour), and finally, a fundamental faith in the capacity of human nature for self-improvement.[107] Thus, a static interpretation of Confucianism is, perhaps, misleading. Destiny, or the "Way of Heaven" (*Dao Troi*), could be an active force as much as a stabilizing and conservative one.[108] The Confucian superior man, possessing the capacity to understand the Way, could and should influence the temporal and cosmological reality.[109] To quote Mencius, "there would always be times of revolt." [110] Duiker has also observed, "it is an easier step from Confucianism to Marxism than to capitalism, to a community-oriented socialist society than to one constructed on a libertarian, individualist basis." [111]

Perhaps, then the leap from Confucianism to Marxist-Communism was not so great as it might seem. It is possible to see other parallels between the two, in the processes of absorption, assimilation and transformation of Marxist ideology into the Vietnamese context. Just as Confucian forms and institutions were adapted to Vietnamese uses, as with the orthodoxy campaigns of the scholar-gentry landlords or the subversive poetry of Cao Ba Quat, Ho Chi Minh adapted and reinscribed Marxist thought within Vietnamese models, in which Confucianism remained an important part. Duiker even goes so far as to argue that Vietnamese Marxism was "a type of reformed Confucianism":

a Confucianism adapted to modern conditions, a dynamic new ideology dedicated broadly to ideals that had animated the philosophy of the old Master, but more scientific and ... revised to meet the challenges and possibilities of the modern era.
[112]

In order to assess the persuasiveness of this argument it is useful to compare and contrast the ways in which Ho Chi Minh's brand of Communism differed from Soviet Marxist-Leninism. To begin with, Ho Chi Minh's ideal revolutionary was not the nihilistic anarchist of Nechaev, whose "catechism of a revolutionary" was admired by Lenin and became the bible of the Bolshevik Party:

For where Nechaev assumed that contemporary standards of morality had little relevance to the revolutionary code of conduct, Ho Chi Minh assumed that a revolutionary code need not do violence to traditional Confucian morality ... except for ... reference to the Party, Ho's commandments could easily be accepted in any devout Confucian home.[113]

Vietnamese Communism also differed from Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy in its emphasis on the role of the peasantry in the revolutionary alliance.[114] While Ho Chi Minh did not formally depart from Leninist orthodoxy which advocated a "worker-peasant" alliance, Ho's version of the alliance did not discriminate between the "leading force" and "vanguard status" of the proletariat and the "basic force" and subordinate role of the peasant.[115] Given the overwhelmingly rural character of Vietnamese society, a revolution based primarily on the efforts of the proletariat was untenable.[116] The greater emphasis on the alliance between the leadership corps and the peasants correspond to Confucian models of social order and attitudes about the rural and peasant class:

The Vietnamese village by its very rusticity had been an inviolable sanctuary of the nation. It was not that each village was capable of resisting individually. But these villages were found everywhere ... Vietnam is ... a way of being and living whose expression and means of expansion are the village.[117]

The exalted status which Ho Chi Minh attributed to the peasant population also implied a greater need for a unifying, populous ideology which would appeal to both urban and rural

constituents: "good leadership of the guerilla movement by the party of the proletariat is only possible if the latter possesses influence over the peasants, and if the peasants accept its slogans and struggle to realise them." [118] Ho Chi Minh's Communism was specifically adapted to appeal to the Confucian value-hierarchies and political models which remained influential among the Vietnamese peasantry.

Finally, it is interesting to realize the degree to which Ho Chi Minh himself conformed to both the romantic Vietnamese archetype of the young scholar-patriot (which was itself a product of Confucian influence) and the formal Confucian ideal of the "superior man" (*chun tzu*, in Chinese; *quan tu*, in Vietnamese):

Ho Chi Minh projected all the desirable qualities in Confucian ethics: rectitude, probity, sincerity, modesty, courage, and self-sacrifice. To impressionable young Vietnamese intellectuals disgusted with the hypocrisy, corruption, cowardice, and greed ... in colonial society, Ho Chi Minh was the rare exception, the "superior man" in the broadest sense.[119]

Arguably, Ho Chi Minh exploited this image of the Confucian master in order to reinforce his appeal among the scholar-gentry and among the peasantry whose role in the revolution he gave much prominence. For instance, his textbook on Marxist revolutionary doctrine, "The Road to Revolution" included a section on the proper behavior of a revolutionary which corresponded to Confucian moral and social standards.[120] In this way, Confucian moral exhortation was utilized as a revolutionary tool. Like the first-generation of scholar-gentry anti-collaborators, Ho Chi Minh understood that "individual moral principle ... existed as a political force." [121] Duiker concludes that among the early leaders of Vietnamese Communism, the "moral imperative of serving the Vietnamese nation in its hour of crisis appears to have been the crucial factor." [122]

Conclusion

Confucianism in Vietnam cannot be divorced from the political sphere. Wielded by both the colonizers and the colonized, Confucian ideas, institutions, and the class of elite which was most closely associated with it, became integral to strategies of political legitimacy, power and control. French imperialism and Vietnamese nationalism and communism co-opted and adapted Confucianism to political uses: morality became Machiavellian. The particular potency of a primarily moral ideology speaks to both the character and traditions of the Vietnamese people- for whom political legitimacy was located in the moral sphere of the Confucian social order-as well as to the persuasiveness of the moral imperative over purely imperialistic or nationalistic imperatives. The alliance of Confucianism with both of these became an irresistible political force.

Notes

[1] William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power In Vietnam*, Second Edition Boulder,

Colorado: Westview Press, 1996, p.25

[2] Ann Laura Stoler, "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia" *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 198

[3] Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina - French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996, p.44

[4] Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina, Colonial Encounters*. Oxford, New York: Berg, 2001, p.11

[5] *ibid*, p.16

[6] *ibid*, p.29

[7] *ibid*, p.22

[8] Norindr, *op. cit.*, p.31

[9] *ibid*, p.42

[10] James Mill, *History of British India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, pp.248-250

[11] David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981, p.34

[12] Cooper, *op. cit.*, p.19

[13] Marr, *op. cit.*, p.67

[14] *ibid*, p.36

[15] Norindr, *op. cit.*, p.46

[16] *ibid*, p.46

[17] Marr, *op. cit.*, p.40

[18] *ibid*, p.55

[19] *ibid*, p.60

[20] *ibid.* p.60

[21] *ibid*, p.55

[22] *ibid*, p.61

[23] *ibid*, p.63

[24] *ibid*, p.64

[25] *ibid*, p.64

[26] *ibid*, p.55

[27] *ibid*, p.69

[28] Eric T. Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Petain's Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe and Indochina, 1940-1944*. Stanford University Press, 2001, p.151

[29] *ibid*, p.151

[30] *ibid*, p.151

[31] *ibid*, p.52

[32] *ibid*, p.193

[33] *ibid*, p.193

[34] *ibid*, p.196

[35] *ibid*, p.169

[36] *ibid*, p.180

[37] *ibid*, p.180

[38] *ibid*, p.167, p.171

[39] *ibid*, p.168

[40] David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945 - The Quest For Power*. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995, p.72

[41] Jennings, op. cit., p.181

[42] Marr, *Vietnam 1945 - The Quest For Power*, p.29

[43] John T. McAlister, Jr. and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution*. New York, Evanston and London: Harper Torchbooks, 1970, p..51

[44] Alexander Barton Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model - A Comparative Study of Nguyen and Ch'ing Civil Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971, I.

[45] David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, p.7

[46] Don Luce and John Sommer, *Viet Nam - The Unheard Voices*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1969, p.25

[47] Nguyen Van Ky "Rethinking the Status of Vietnamese Women in Folklore and Oral History" *Viet-Nam Expose - French Scholarship on Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Society*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002, pp.90-91

[48] Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, op. cit.

[49] Woodside, op. cit., p.7

[50] McAlister and Mus, op. cit., p.50

[51] FitzGerald, op. cit., p.22

[52] *ibid*, p.22

[53] *ibid*, p.22

[54] *ibid*, p.22

[55] *ibid*, p.22

[56] Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, p.20

[57] *ibid*, p.82

[58] *ibid*, p.83

[59] *ibid*, p.83

[60] *ibid*, p.10

[61] *ibid*, p.15

[62] *ibid*, p.15

[63] Woodside, *op. cit.*, p.9

[64] *ibid*, p.12

[65] *ibid*, p.12

[66] *ibid*, p.12

[67] *ibid*, p.12

[68] Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, p.18

[69] Woodside, *op. cit.*, p.229

[70] *ibid*, p.225

[71] *ibid*, p.228

[72] *ibid*, p.229

[73] Duiker, *op. cit.*, p.7

[74] Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, p.96

[75] Duiker, *op. cit.*, p.7

[76] *ibid*, p.7

[77] Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, p.48

[78] Duiker, op. cit., p.8

[79] Woodside, op. cit., p.38. Woodside gives the following gloss for this proverb in note 72, p. 391: "*Mot nguoi lam quan, ca ho duoc nho.*"

[80] ibid p.42

[81] ibid, p.37

[82] Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille - A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940*, p.124

[83] Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille - A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940*, p.124

[84] ibid, p.124

[85] ibid, p.131

[86] ibid, p.132

[87] Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, p.97

[88] ibid, p.48

[89] Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, p.333. According to this story, Nguyen Trai, having begged to follow his mandarin father into servitude in China, in the early 15th century, was instructed to stay and help save his country, and thus also revenge his father.

[90] Duiker, op. cit., p.9

[91] ibid, p.11

[92] ibid, p.13

[93] ibid, p.14

[94] ibid, p. 14

[95] ibid, p.14

[96] ibid, p.14

[97] *ibid*, p.14

[98] *ibid*, p.14

[99] *ibid*, p.18

[100] *ibid*, p.18

[101] *ibid*, p.16

[102] *ibid*, p.25

[103] *ibid*, p.25

[104] *ibid*, p.25

[105] *ibid*, p.25

[106] *ibid*, p.26

[107] Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, p. 334

[108] Duiker, *op. cit.*, p.26

[109] Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, p.354

[110] *ibid*, p.354

[111] *ibid*, p.67

[112] Duiker, *op. cit.*, p.27

[113] *ibid*, pp.26-27

[114] *ibid*, p.28

[115] *ibid*, p.20

[116] *ibid*, p.20

[117] *ibid*, p.23

[118] McAlister and Mus, op. cit., p.50

[119] ibid, p.22

[120] ibid, p.22

[121] ibid, p.27

[122] Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, p.83

[123] Duiker, op. cit., p.29

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