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# Postcolonial Vietnam: hybrid modernity

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## Introduction

How might postcolonial studies be relevant for comprehending contemporary Vietnam? Thus far, scholarly critiques of a unitary Vietnamese narrative have emerged only within the socialist context. These works point to the Party-state which functions like a 'memory machine' producing communist histories, novels, and memoirs in assembly-line fashion which depict the past in approved ways. Communist memoirs and novels support the virtues of socialism and belittle those of noncommunist societies.[1] An interesting contrast to these state-produced hegemonic narratives is Shawn McHale's discussion of the case of the philosopher Tran Duc Thao, who, in two articles published in 1956, criticized the Vietnamese Workers Party for its shortcomings in land reform policy, and pushed for the development of 'democratic freedoms'. Such writings resulted in Tran being labeled as a 'hidden enemy' by the Party, and he was subsequently silenced within Vietnam for most of the next thirty years.[2]

Patricia Pelley also brings our attention to the production of the history of national Vietnamese unity which ignores internal divisions and factions. Her 2002 book, entitled *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past*, examines Vietnamese historiography produced in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), proclaimed in Hanoi on September 2, 1945, to reveal how a national narrative was constructed at a time of state consolidation and continuous warfare. She tells of how official Vietnamese historians and others decided on what should count as legitimate historical narrative in order to generate (due to party and government decrees) a Marxist history of Vietnam.[3] She mainly looks at the postcolonial situation within the socialist context, acknowledging that there is a bridge between Vietnam's colonial legacy and its social origins: 'The Vietnamese who orchestrated the revolutionary break from France were often imbued with colonial sensibilities—about the quasi-sacred status of science, for one, and the idea that certain groups of people were destined to dominate and "civilize" others.'[4] In *Asian Voices in a Postcolonial Age*, Susan Bayly further underlines the bridges between colonial legacies and socialism, showing the interweaving of colonial inheritances and socialism and their impacts on the world of Hanoi Vietnamese intellectuals today, noting that the key role of socialist values and views in the life of these intellectuals has not been fully 'recognised in the literature on postcoloniality'.[5] Other scholars have followed in these

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footsteps by presenting alternative voices and histories in colonial and postcolonial Vietnam which contrast with the official reinterpretation of the meaning of the past.[6]

To my knowledge, little attention has been directed to reflecting on how the Vietnamese Marxist-Leninist state has offered an alternative modernity, rather than a critique of modernity, which might partially explain the lack of a postcolonial approach to the study of this country. Rather than examining singularly the impact of French colonialism, I would suggest that we should recognize a hybrid modernity at work in postcolonial Vietnam.[7] This essay extends the above cited works by exploring the legacies of colonial and socialist modernities and how these give a specific flavor to the postcolonial situation.

Both colonial and socialist modernity may be said to embrace a Weberian definition of modernity based on an ongoing quest for progress. The colonial state relied on various organizational instruments in hope to reach an ideal of European modernity based on the production of reliable knowledge to be used to foster a better future. Colonies have often been presented as laboratories of modernity where missionaries, educators, and doctors could perform experiments in social engineering.[8] Socialism also represents the essence of modernity due to its trust in instrumental rationality, an inheritance of European Enlightenment rationality.[9] Projects of modernization such as the control of nature and society by science and technology are linked to the process of both imperial and socialist nation-building.

Within a Postcolonial Studies perspective, this linear and universal progression hides 'a multiplicity of often conflicting and frequently parallel narratives',[10] arising out of colonial domination and its aftermath. While Pelley's orientation focuses on the question of 'at what moment the postcolonial begins', our research question is 'Of what does the postcolonial consist?' Some of the questions are: how does the Cold War period complicate the term 'postcolonialism', and how was the Vietnamese nation-building process influenced by a project of socialist modernity—a different form of colonial modernity—coming from China and the USSR? The colonial and socialist modernities have fostered a hybrid modernity, the results of the interaction between both top-down and bottom-up processes. This hybridizing process will be examined through two substantive areas of social and cultural practices in Vietnam today.

The choice of science (medicine) and ethnicity (the classification of indigenous highland groups) as terrains of investigation is due to the fact that both the French colonial and the postcolonial regimes valorized science and ethnicity as part of their project to promote respectively a modern colonial imperial nation and a modern socialist nation. In turn these two topics are linked to the issue of hybridity. Hybrid medicine refers to the use of traditional Vietnamese medical cures as well as Western medicine. Hybridity in the classification of population refers to the process through which the upland people, such as the *Montagnards*, redefined their own identity. The highland people assimilated selected Western ideas and vocabularies and juxtaposed them with their own indigenous conceptions. The result led them

to stress not only their ethnic differences from the colonizers, but also from the Viet majority. Hybridity is then used as a site of counter-hegemonic resistance against the French and later postcolonial state and to nurture an incipient ethno-nationalism.

## Top-down application of a colonial modernity and its legacies: appropriations, hybridities, and rejections

### *Medical and therapeutic practices: a case of hybrid medicine*

The field of medicine in French colonial Vietnam from 1887 to 1954 served as a crucible in which indigenous people mixed traditional practices with those of the West. For the colonial power, Western medicine was promoted as an agent of modernization that would help emancipate the locals from backwardness and superstition. This was part of a greater 'civilizing mission' which aimed at uplifting the 'inferior' indigenous populations as a means of better integrating them into the French imperial nation, known as Greater France. In this historical context, Monnais and Tousignant argue that the medical practices in Vietnam under French colonialism put in place the foundations of today's Vietnamese national health policy and also influenced common people's medical attitudes.[11] More precisely, Monnais contends in her various publications that Western medicine and techniques were not imposed on Vietnam, but rather were progressively adapted to the local geographical, pathological, economic and to some degree socio-cultural context, and then blended into local practices. She writes that medicalization was a process in which Vietnamese health-care professionals and patients participated in order to define it, at least from the 1920s onward. She demonstrates that if there was a relationship between colonialism, social control, and medicalization, this relationship was more complex than we usually interpret it and was far from being systematic.

Historically, medical advances made earlier, in the outset of the nineteenth century, regarding the treatment of tropical illnesses, such as the discovery of quinine and drainage as effective measures for preventing and treating malaria, facilitated European colonial expansion. By the end of the century, industrialized Europe and the United States were witnessing an important 'medical revolution', which included the advent of bacteriology which advocated better regulation of personal and public hygiene and, soon, offered new preventive tools to fight infectious diseases. This bacteriological revolution unveiled the invisible means by which illness was diffused and gave, thanks to vaccination and better salubrity, a means to prevent disease.[12] Such a 'medical revolution' made the French health-care campaign in Vietnam possible. At first, doctors thought they could implement universally a French 'archetype' of medical care in Indochina. The French health-care system in Indochina was initially carried out under the motto 'Vaccinate, Register, and Disinfect'. In 1890 a Colonial Health Advisory Council and a Colonial Health Corps of colonial doctors that would make provision for hospitals were created. In 1905, a health-care plan was implemented. The

latter encouraged collective prevention and hygiene education, and concentrated on combating smallpox, cholera, plague, and malaria. Medication was part of this prevention.

Monnais documents how the advent of scientific medicine and the expansion of the pharmaceutical industry in colonial Vietnam led to a tumultuous encounter between traditional medical practices and the practices enforced by French colonizers. At the background of this encounter was the growing popularity of self-medication and a more complex form of medical pluralism of a combination of Western and traditional treatments; the Westernization of a drug business and its entry into legal and illegal regional and even international markets; and the building of a regulatory scheme for medical and pharmaceutical practice.[13]

According to Monnais and Tousignant, the press under colonialism circulated information about medicine and therapies while also indicating the existence of 'informed' self-medication which included again both Western and 'traditional' medicines. In addition, as part of a plan to extend the availability of Western medicine to the local population, a network of basic medicinal provision shops was created in 1920. This network was rarely run by health-care professionals; the idea was to promote informed self-medication grounded on the consumption of basic Western drugs for common illnesses. Based on the efficacy—or at least a perceived efficacy—of various Western pharmaceuticals, Vietnamese would reject some while demanding others; this selection shows how they chose to self-medicate during the interwar period.[14] Monnais and Tousignant made the following observation:

> practices of self-medication were widespread at the time, which may be an indicator of various forms of therapeutic pluralism. ... These practices include both the parallel ingestion of Sino-Vietnamese medicines and pharmaceuticals [traditional Vietnamese medicine has been influenced by Chinese medical tradition] ... and the combination of substances as ingredients mixed within a single 'hybrid' medication.[15]

It was common for therapists and druggists to prescribe and sell the 'hybrid' combinations, while advertisements touted the therapeutic benefits of mixing 'Western efficiency' with 'Asian tradition'. This is a movement of hybridization which existed elsewhere at the time, for instance in neighboring China.[16] Additionally, by the 1920s, some French doctors and administrators had started to endorse traditional Vietnamese medicine for their patients as a cheaper alternative, but the majority still perceived it as 'quackery'.

Despite the French promotion of a 'civilized', hence superior, system of Western medicine, Vietnamese continued to depend on traditional medicine for reasons that were political, in the belief that Vietnamese were entitled to 'their' medicine, economic since Western medicine was expensive, and practical since pharmaceuticals were often out of reach, and some were ineffective in curing various tropical diseases.[17] The use of Sino-Vietnamese treatments continued beyond the French colonialism, which ended in July 1954, due to medical shortages during the continued wars (1946–1975) and

the promotion and institutionalization of traditional herbal medicine in Vietnam. In this instance, the Vietnamese resorted to traditional medicinal practices not necessarily out of conviction, but rather due to practicality, when they did not have access to Western medicine. After the war, the political leaders reappropriated Western medical principles. However, traditional medicine has also evolved from marginalized 'quackery' and has been placed alongside enduring elements of the colonial health-care system in the contemporary health-care system. Here again this is the result of a mix of political convictions and practicality.

As Wahlberg documents, the Vietnamese practice of self-sufficiency in taking herbal remedies for basic illnesses is favored by the Vietnamese state, which has been promoting an 'integrated approach' to health care since 1955. In 2003 a 'Drugs at Home' program was initiated to encourage the cost-effective approach of communal clinics and villagers growing medicinal plants in their gardens and using them for common illnesses.[18] In fact, these practices existed before 2003 and this 'Drugs at Home' program can be linked to the privatization of the Vietnamese health-care system since 1989. Today, Nguyen Thi Kim Chuc and Göran Tomson's study shows how the privatization of national health care since 1989 has led to a high incidence of Vietnamese patients acting as *tu lam bac sy* (their own doctors), that is, they often choose self-medication and tend toward the overuse of antibiotics. Their recent study demonstrates that 'less than 1% of customers came with prescriptions and 94.9% decided by themselves which drugs to buy. Antibiotics represented 17%, of which 90% were broad spectrum.'[19] Okumura, Wakai, and Umenai's research also reveals how 40 to 60 percent of people in Vietnam rely on self-medication and often overuse antibiotics.[20]

In sum, French colonialism played an important role in familiarizing Vietnamese with Western pharmaceuticals and also with renewed, more complex forms of medical pluralism. As Monnais and Tousignant show, while the Vietnamese often decide for themselves which medical treatments to use, their therapeutic preferences evolved to encompass not only herbal treatments but also pharmaceuticals. Such behaviors have persisted from the colonial period to the *doi moi* (1986 onward), due to, among other reasons, limited access to Western medicine. Choices depended, and still depend, on various factors: diseases, experiences of illnesses and treatments such as toxicity and side-effects, and familiarity with a product. However, since the privatization of the health-care system in 1989 and the progressive lifting of embargoes, the population has had greater access to Western medicine. Overall Vietnamese have been depending on a postcolonial 'integrative' health-care system that originated during the colonial period.

In addition, local doctors, an important agent in the configuration of medical attitudes, also played a vital role in building a modern socialist nation by applying their scientific knowledge for the good of the Vietnamese community. For instance, wartime and early postwar generations of professional medics in Vietnam are widely regarded as heroes of nationalist and revolutionary endeavor, and certainly not as 'mimic men' or individuals subservient to colonial power and culture through their acquisition of

medical skill and training. This contrasts with Homi Bhabha's suggestion that the cultures of postcolonial countries are distinguished by conflicts between imitation (mimicry) and originality.[21] We may consider the case of Ton That Tung, a prominent surgeon born into a mandarin family and trained in colonial institutions. Ton That Tung joined the Viet Minh in August 1945 and performed medical service at the war front before becoming Vice-Minister of Health after the First Indochinese War (1946–1954) until 1962.[22]

Finally, medicine has evolved over time into different hybrid forms. Not only has there been an interweaving of colonial and local practices, but precolonial attitudes grounded in traditional Vietnamese medicine have also been influenced by Chinese medical traditions. This point adds yet another layer of complication to postcolonialism that would now stretch back (in terms of knowledge, forms, and effects) to the precolonial days. In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty advises us to understand how European thoughts were appropriated by non-Western nations, how European Enlightenment 'may be renewed from and for the margins'.[23] From the case of Vietnamese medical practices, it is obvious that not only thoughts and beliefs, but specific practices, were borrowed from the West; and an analysis of their reception, their assimilation, and even their reconceptualization demonstrates how the 'subaltern groups' were agents of their own medicalization.

### *Ethnic categorization in the colonial context: instrumental hybridity*

Social engineering achieved through means of ethnic classification was also a part of colonial and postcolonial projects of modernization. The state perceived classificatory projects as instruments of control and thus domination over highland groups. Both the colonial and postcolonial states consigned highlanders to a state of 'perpetual otherness'. Indeed colonial and communist officials considered the minorities as Vietnam's 'children' within the national family, who were first guided by the colonial power and then by the Viet majority. In both periods, there was a necessity to 'civilize' them, and subsequently to label them as the 'others' in need of tutelage.

In his study on the Montagnard ethnic identity, Salemink shows how political and strategic reasons led French officials and ethnographers, in the 1930s, to construct such a group as one ethnic entity, when in fact the Montagnards had encompassed different tribes with various languages and cultures, and living in bounded territories. For instance, a colonial state-sponsored Montagnard culture was promoted with symbolic rituals such as the oath-swearing ceremonies and the buffalo sacrifice. A French ethnographic narrative put forward a proposal to prohibit ethnic Vietnamese, i.e. the Viet or 'national majority', from entering the area, to counteract Vietnamese claims over the highland people and even to imagine an autonomous highland zone. However, rather than perceiving such instrumentalization of ethnicity as an initiative only coming from the top-down, mountain dwellers accepted some of these new rituals, which implied a common identity, and blended them with their own culture.

Indeed, the confluence of an overreaching highland group identity and a more local one was not just a 'given' from the colonial experience but, as Gerald Hickey notes, was rooted also in a preexisting common culture, based on the quest for fertility and potency, among the different groups dwelling in the central highlands. For instance, the highlanders believed that society and nature depended on cosmic forces that controlled fertility. A gift of cosmic forces, potency permitted individuals to maximize fertility; lavish rituals such as sacrifices of buffalo or pigs were a means of demonstrating potency. Furthermore, showing potency allowed villagers' leaders to simulate, as stewards, maintaining moral order premised upon harmony among individuals, nature, and the cosmos.[24] In addition, Hickey underscored how this cultural difference of being upland people was expressed and in turn appropriated by the new highland elite against French rule. This instrumentalization of hybridity, a blending of indigenous conceptions with a colonial definition of what it means to be a highlander, became a tool against the French. For example, the Python God Movement of 1937, forecasting the onset of a golden age and the eradication of the French overseers, was a case in point.[25]

Such instrumentalization was also important for the colonizers. During the First Indochina War (1946–1954), the central highlands were a strategic asset in order to regain Indochina. In 1948, the French government renamed the central highlands the *Pays Montagnard du Sud Indochinois* (PMSI) under the authority of Emperor Bao Dai (whom the French nominated as chief of state in 1949 as an alternative to Ho Chi Minh's DRV), but in fact ruled directly by the French.[26] Despite the fact that the PMSI was abolished by the South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem in 1955, a Montagnard ethno-nationalism remained an enduring challenge for the postcolonial state. More precisely, in 1958 the Forces United for the Liberation of Races Oppressed (FULRO) was created as a movement to unify the tribes and fight against the Viet. Its goal was the restoration of the special status enjoyed by the PMSI. Until 1992, FULRO guerrillas fought against communist rule—at one point encompassing around 7,000 soldiers—and demanded autonomy for the region.[27] This Montagnard separatism had also led some Montagnards to join the fight alongside the American soldiers during the Vietnam War. Now, the most obvious act of covert resistance for them is to embrace Christianity as a means to protest against the Vietnamese state's control over their life; indeed, many of them had already converted to Protestantism during the Vietnam War. As Salemink argues, Protestantism redefined Montagnard ethnic identity by redrawing ethnic boundaries along religious lines.[28] Preserving as well as transforming their distinction from the other groups was a means of creating an instrumental hybridity that became a tool of resistance against the state's authority.

Montagnard ethno-nationalism was mostly molded during and inherited from the colonial era as a divisive element which has become embedded in the politics of the postcolonial state. Here we can see the complexity of colonial and postcolonial identities and how the colonial encounter might influence ethnic subjectivity. As Loomba stresses, postcolonialism is again an enigma

full of contradictions and qualifications which reveals the many, and sometimes opposed, historical narratives.[29] As already stated, the officers' classification of the hill people determined strategies for their control of the region. For instance, the current communist regime went back to the old tribal differentiations for its classification of ethnic groups and dismissed the term Montagnard as a common designation.[30] The supposedly Montagnard ethnic identity has been thought of as a hindrance to Vietnamese nationalism.

In sum, the manipulation of ethnic categories has long been part of state-sponsored social engineering. Such classificatory projects reveal the cultural intercrossing of various ways of conceptualizing the identity of highland people. However, a number of top-down policies have led to unintended and complicated forms of hybridity which remain very much part of the postcolonial situation today.

## Bottom-up consequences of hybrid modernity and US imperialism

### *Vietnam in relation to its margin populations: the Evolué and Viet Kieu*

The residuum of colonialism does not remain isolated in its effects but is caught up interactively with other contextual elements in the identity formation of postcolonial subjects. This is illustrated by the complex genealogies of hybrid forms, such as the case of Henriette Bui, a Vietnamese-Chinese female doctor in Vietnam with French citizenship, whose story illustrates how hybridity was at the heart of the colonial experience, and hence the problematic use of the binary categories 'Western' and 'non-Western'. Not only did Bui offer creative resistance to how the colonizers would define her, but she also refused to let postwar Vietnamese society delimit her role.[31] This example brings forward the issue of the so-called *évolués*, the few locals who were perceived as 'developed' enough to receive French citizenship and collaborate more actively in the building of a modern Greater France. This case is also linked to today's *Viet Kieu* (Vietnamese overseas) and how, for some of them at least, their life and identity as well as their psyche were altered by French colonialism. Interestingly, both the *évolué* and *Viet Kieu* stood in opposition to so-called rational classification procedures since their existence contradicted clear distinctions between categories of identity which were part of modernity. The *évolués* were challenging the boundaries between what it meant to be a colonizer versus a colonized, while the *Viet Kieu* were located at the margins or outside of the postcolonial project of nation-building.

As a Vietnamese-Chinese doctor trained under the French, Bui did not represent the average colonial woman in her career or personal life. As Tran Thi Liên notes, she did not belong to the category of Vietnamese women, suggested by David Marr, who were active in the public sphere, especially politics, and who subsequently joined the Vietnamese anticolonial movement.[32] Her experience was molded not only by colonial constraints, but also by gender restrictions. She encountered racism from her French colleagues as an Asian doctor, and opprobrium from common Vietnamese people for

walking out on a marriage arranged by her father. She was also unusual in choosing to put her career first, refusing to get involved in politics, and giving equal medical attention to wounded soldiers during the Vietnam War regardless of their political affiliation. Rather than fitting into this binary polarization of traditional versus politically engaged women, Bui embodied the fluidity of hybrid identity. Like other colonial subjects and citizens, she had to craft her own sense of self from being a professional trained in France to a doctor on the war front, and subsequently a resident of France after 1978. Her biographical trajectory reveals how her subjectivity was never fully achieved, but was rather always evolving. Her case reminds us of Loomba's suggestion: we should not pit the topics of 'migrancy, exile and hybridity against rootedness, nation and authenticity', but rather position and assess the ideological, political, and emotional aversions and attractions of these terms, as well as their intersections, in the various histories of colonialism and postcoloniality.[33]

For instance, the blurred boundary between migrancy and rootedness brings forward the issue of intercultural relationships, and how they act to mold the process through which one embodies his/her hybridization. Interviewing *Viet Kieu*—overseas Vietnamese—who decided to return to Vietnam, Long stresses their often shared belief in the inevitability of their return, as part of destiny; yet, they noted at the same time their control over such journey. The sense of inevitability—perhaps part of the Vietnamese culture—with the power of individual will—part of the Western ones—reveals a specifically *Viet Kieu* interpretation of the event. In addition to this perceived duality, by returning to Vietnam, V*iet Kieu* were able to figure where home was. For instance, one French *Viet Kieu* couple who journeyed to Vietnam realized that their sense of kinship was stronger within the *Viet Kieu* community in France, and felt that they were ultimately French. Finally, all of them mentioned how their journey to Vietnam was reframing their sense of identity and their kinship relations.[34]

Others have had more difficulties in reconciling the various aspects of a hybrid identity. For instance, the well-known French writer Kim Lefèvre discussed her anxiety about returning to Vietnam where she had spent her childhood and the impact of this trajectory on her personality. As she wrote: 'My personality is made up of two successive layers: Vietnamese during my childhood, French later. Sometimes they mix but mostly they are strictly partitioned off.' Through her narrative recounting the experience of rejection by her fellowmen due to her mixed ancestry, she reveals the cultural impossibility of merging what is Vietnamese in her and what is French.[35]

In the above instances, the processes of mutation and construction, embodied in the concept of hybridity, were at play. Hybridity assumes the notion of diversity; hence, I do not claim to generalize about the *Viet Kieu* as a unified community. Rather, I seek to emphasize the diversity of their experience and the building of the self due to their gender, class, age, race, and location abroad. Even if colonialism means little to some of the younger generation of *Viet Kieu*, the fact that a portion of them live in France today clearly shows the impact of colonialism on their lives. However, in order to

grasp the experiences of many Vietnamese, we need to move beyond the 'the "hybridised" self–other relationships of coloniser and colonised' and look at their Vietnamese encounters with different cultures and people due to the localized experience of the Cold War and the alternative modernity offered by the communist experience.[36] Modern socialism, too, has been part of the postcolonial experiences.

*How locals reacted to an alternative modernity: socialist modernity*

Modern Vietnam emerged from ravaging wars, while the Marxist-Leninist state was established by the army, which won successive foreign and civil wars. Vietnam fought the First Indochina War from 1946 to 1954 against the French imperial nation. Warfare against the US and American-backed forces resumed from 1959 to 1975; known as the Vietnam War, this ended with the victory of North Vietnam over the US-supported Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). What ensued was the unification of Vietnam under the communist regime of the North. This regime, rather than being a critique of modernity, offers an alternative modernity which promotes science as the engine of progress. Indeed, postcolonial leaders embraced a modern and universal vision of history progressing toward the realization of an ideal future based on the Marxist-Leninist ideology. In terms of center–periphery hierarchies, China was spreading such an ideal toward Vietnam.

More precisely, in the North, from the days of colonialism onward bonds of dependence developed toward China, another 'center' in relation to Vietnam. China was an example to emulate as well as a country which offered concrete help to Vietnam's nationalist movement during the first half of the twentieth century.[37] Indeed, Vietnam had very close ties with China in the 1950s, and for two decades the DRV received considerable economic aid from China. At the same time, Vietnamese children were sent to southern China in order to attend Chinese-sponsored Vietnamese-run schools, to equip teachers and other specialists with skills which would assist in building a new socialist Vietnam.[38] However, tensions emerged during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of different perceptions of the USSR; due to geographical and cultural proximities, Vietnam has always been worried about excessive Chinese influence, and Vietnamese authorities relied in the past on the USSR as another 'center' to check China's traditional influence. Tension also emerged as a consequence of opposing perspectives regarding relationships with the USA. Since the 1990s, a full normalization of relations has been established, but still some contentious issues remain, such as the South China Sea.[39]

Today, both countries share a common interest in the stability of the region and promoting a socialist market economy, which leads to a feeling of a similar destiny and frequent political encounters. However, the economic and political dependency on China was more problematic since a large number of colonial writers had presented Vietnam as a smaller and less glorious replica of China. Vietnam was perceived as an entity which only partially assimilated the once superior civilization of China. According to Pelley, the postcolonial obsession with origins is in part due to this claim. Hence, the effort to

decolonize the past, here to 'de-Chinese' it, by insisting on a continuous link connecting Vietnamese today to the mythical age of the Hùng Kings, traced to the third millennium BCE, and the erasing of the Hùng Kings' traditional, i.e. Sinitic, origins. Disengaging Vietnamese culture from the Chinese culture became one of the tasks of the postcolonial scholars.[40] Still Vietnam remains one of the two most 'sinicized' Asian countries (the other being Korea) and shares with China many cultural traits.

In terms of center–periphery hierarchies, the Soviet Union became another center to which Vietnamese were sent for training, projects of cooperation and so on, as part of modernization during the Cold War era. France was no longer the colonial empire; the Soviet bloc became the 'other empire' for Vietnam. For example, Marr notes that more than 70,000 Vietnamese specialists were trained in the Soviet Union between 1955 and 1985.[41] The end of the Cold War led to the downsizing of Vietnam's standing army, from 1987 to 1989. The Ministry of National Defense then sent more than 25,000 demobilized army and defense industry workers to this 'other empire', i.e. the Soviet Union, and its satellite countries East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria through labor cooperation programs. By 1989, it was estimated that of the 150,000 Vietnamese employed abroad, as many as 40 percent were ex-soldiers, mostly located in socialist nations.[42] In addition, despite the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, many Vietnamese citizens stayed in these countries where they had settled; there are today 225,000 Vietnamese living in East Germany, the former USSR, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia. This is mainly the outcome of the exportation of about 300,000 Vietnamese workers in the 1980s to these countries.[43]

Therefore the outcome of the history of French colonialism and communist dependency led to the confluence of two modernities, resulting in a hybrid modernity. For instance, as part of a worldwide revolutionary modernism, French-speaking Vietnamese were able to convert this cultural asset into a revolutionary skill by working as experts in other socialist postcolonies such as Algeria, Mozambique, and Angola. They allowed Vietnam to participate in a worldwide building of a socialist ideal, not only receiving aid from the 'elder brothers', the USSR and China, but also providing their expertise in Africa and in other continents.[44] For instance, official reports mention a few thousand Vietnamese trained in scientific and technical fields who worked in African countries in the 1980s and early 1990s.[45] Hence, crossing of boundaries, mixing of experiences and knowledge within the geographical realm of the communist world were part of the postcolonial life of Vietnam citizenry, and its colonial legacy (such as language skill) was put in the service of communist modernism.

### *Neocolonialism and US imperialism*

'Postcoloniality, for its part, is a salutary reminder of the persistence of "neo-colonial" relations within the "new" world order and the multinational division of labor.'[46] In an age of globalization, attention must be paid to neocolonial processes which deal with the larger relations of geo-economic

hegemony. However, such links are rarely made in the field of postcolonial studies. In the case of Vietnam, there is definitely a need to relate the French colonial past to neocolonialism today,[47] especially since many Vietnamese would see neocolonial relations—the role of first world multinational corporations—as affecting their lives. For instance, Thomas and Drummond underline how the growth of international investments in the early 1990s has led to the growing availability of imported consumer products through the opening of new urban shopping centers. They note how Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are becoming bastions of modernity, with populations eager to embrace current technology and new forms of leisure, music, and fashion.[48] During the last few years, the number of satellite dishes and cables has increased rapidly all over Vietnam, permitting access to channels such as MTV and CNN. This diffusion of foreign mass culture through the media could lead to cultural homogenization, i.e. the local culture being displaced by American culture. Such cultural globalization has a more direct impact on the lives of young Vietnamese people and is an intrinsic part of the postcolonial situation.

While colonialism implies the settling of people in a foreign land, imperialism is thought of in terms of the process of colonialism that emerged in Western countries and led to the domination and control of foreign lands and people. The United States' involvement in Vietnam was not that of a colonial enterprise, but rather a forceful deployment of the former's authority over the latter, especially in sponsoring a pro-American state in South Vietnam and supporting Ngo Dinh Diem, the head of the new Republic of Vietnam, from mid-1955 to 1963. The heavy US military presence in southern Vietnam from 1954 to 1974 probably buried deeper the residues of French colonialism. In addition, the destructive impact of the Vietnam War cannot be overstated; it likely has had far more resonance and impact on the psyche of contemporary Vietnamese people than the colonial experience.

## Conclusion

This essay has had three aims. Focusing on health practices and ethnicity, its first concern was to suggest that some colonial legacies remain in contemporary Vietnam and are part of a distinctive colonial modernity. While colonialism does not mean much to Vietnamese who have not experienced colonial rule, it nevertheless continues to influence specific areas of their everyday life. Therapeutic pluralism, self-medication, over-consumption of pharmaceuticals, as well as dangerous drug combinations, are partially the result of Vietnam's complex colonial past, while the treatment of minorities in the highlands under colonialism has become embedded into the postcolonial state's management of ethnic groups. Also, Vietnamese today carry an ID card that is identical to the one created by the colonial state (see Figure 1); today's military intelligence is called *phong thu hai*, a translation of *deuxième bureau* (office of information). In all these and other innumerable instances, the colonial legacy lives on in the daily life of every Vietnamese.

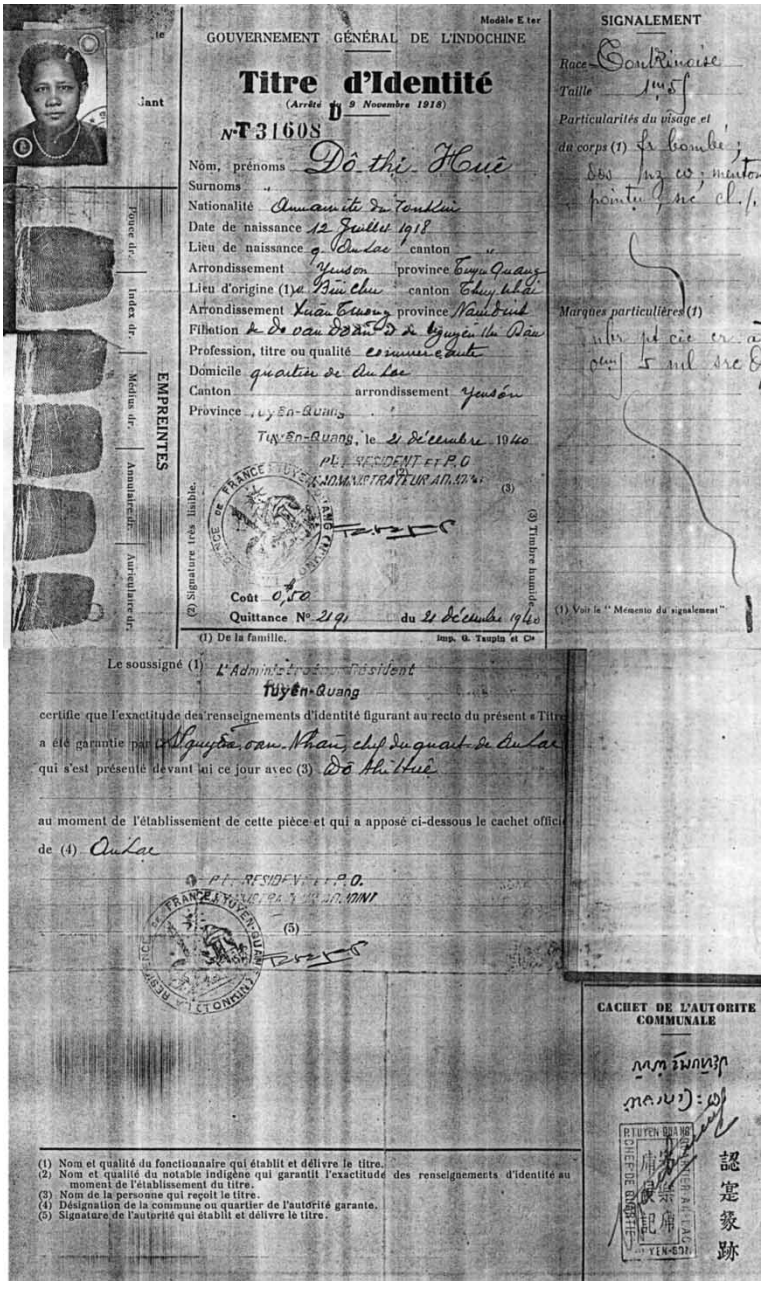


*Figure 1.*

Obviously, the postcolonial government was not built in a vacuum but took over part of the French system of control and adapted it for its own purposes.

The second goal has been to show the impact of a communist modernity, which seeks to emancipate Vietnamese citizens through an authoritarian

project of creating a rational society. While it has become more difficult for the state apparatus to control the population and businesses since the country opened to a capitalist economy in the late 1980s, its leaders still continue to take Marxism-Leninism seriously. The Cold War, and more specifically the communist experience, seems to make French postcolonialism—if only defined as hybridities molded by the encounter between the colonized and colonizer—a deficient framework for understanding Vietnam today. Rather, we argue that communist modernity is one element of Vietnamese post-colonialism. The implementation of an alternative socialist modernity led to the appearance of the *Viet Kieu* (overseas Vietnamese) whose hybridity is at the heart of their experiences. Here, the link between hybridity and modernity needs to be further explored. For example, the French are credited with having brought New Poetry (*Tho Moi*), highly inspired by French Romantic and Symbolist styles. There are many avenues for scholars to assess the colonial influence in the cognitive and cultural practices of the Vietnamese.

Finally, and most importantly, this essay has sought to discuss what the postcolonial consists of in Vietnam. We argue that it contains a hybrid modernity, encompassing both colonial and socialist modernities. Bridging the colonial and communist influences in the Vietnamese postcolonial context offers an appropriate framework for understanding contemporary Vietnam, in light of the prolonged war experiences, US imperialism, and communism. Yet, I remain concerned that scholars who seek to apply the postcolonial framework to Vietnam tend to neglect issues of war and communism, since there is a tendency to choose discourse analysis to the detriment of the material experience of colonialism, war, and communism. Vietnam's complicated historical legacy poses a challenge as we seek to create a postcolonial framework that empowers Vietnamese citizens to better understand changes and continuities in their society. For the Vietnamese case, then, postcolonialism's attention to center–periphery hierarchies underscores the need to look beyond the traditional center, France, to places such as China, the Soviet Union, the 'other empires' and the cultural American center, all of which seem to have a more far-reaching impact on contemporary Vietnam than colonial residues.

## Notes

[1] Shawn McHale, 'Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946–1993', *Journal of Asian Studies* 1(1), 2002, p 29.

[2] McHale, 'Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory', pp 7–31.

[3] Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, p 10.

[4] Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, p 5.

[5] Susan Bayly, *Asian Voices in a Postcolonial Age: Vietnam, India and Beyond*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p 22.

[6] See http://www.lib.washington.edu/SouthEastAsia/vsg/org/aas%20abstract_04.html

[7] The concept of 'hybrid modernity' has been used in other contexts. For instance, Kusno argues that the Indonesian urban landscape since the country's independence at the end of World War II has been altered by the Indonesian people and is made of different types of modernities, with legacies from

Sukarno's syncretic modernism, Suharto's repressive traditionalism, and so on. Abidin Kusno, *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Structure, and Political Cultures in Indonesia*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p 207. In the same vein, Hancock describes Indian home education science as a location of 'hybrid modernity' that allows at the same time Gandhian nationalisms and Euro-Western feminisms. Mary Hancock, 'Gendering the Modern: Women and Home Science in British India', in Antoinette Burton (ed), *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, New York: Routledge, 1999, ch. 9.

[8] Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p 5.

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[10] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, London: Routeldge, 1998, p 12.

[11] Laurence Monnais and Noémi Tousignant, 'The Colonial Life of Pharmaceuticals: Accessibility to Healthcare, Consumption of Medicines, and Medical Pluralism in French Vietnam, 1905–1945', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1(1), 2005, pp 131–168.

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[13] Laurence Monnais, 'Which Medications Did They Trust? The Role of French Colonialism in Vietnamese Attitudes towards Pharmaceuticals, 1858–1939', http://www.princeton.edu/ ~hos/Workshop%20I%20papers/Monnais%20_2_.doc.pdf

[14] Monnais and Tousignant, 'The Colonial Life of Pharmaceuticals', pp 138–142.

[15] Monnais and Tousignant, 'The Colonial Life of Pharmaceuticals', p 145.

[16] See Sherman Cochran, *Chinese Medicine Men: Consumer Culture in China and Southeast Asia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

[17] Monnais, 'Which Medications Did They Trust?' pp 2–3, 19–22.

[18] Ayo Wahlberg, 'Bio-politics and the Promotion of Traditional Herbal Medicine in Vietnam', *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine* 10(2), 2006, pp 12–147.

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[25] Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, pp 352–358. On Hickey's work, see Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850–1900*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp 240–256.

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[30] Salemink, 'Primitive Partisans', p 293.

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[32] Tran Thi Liên, 'Henriette Bui: The Narrative of Vietnam's First Woman Doctor', p 279.

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