

# Shaping Indochinese Identity

*By Blaise Truong-Loi*

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**It is now incongruous to imagine Vietnamese people identifying themselves as “Indochinese”. For a long time, however, the colonial territory served as a framework for the expression of Vietnam’s national identity. This phenomenon does not illustrate so much the effectiveness of the education given in schools under the French empire as the negotiated nature of colonisation in Asia. A fresh look at a classic work.**

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Reviewed : Christopher E. Goscha, *Indochine ou Vietnam*, Paris, Vendémiaire, 2015, translated from English by Agathe Larcher (first English language edition published in 1995), 188 p.

In 1945, a Communist group from South Vietnam explained that the five points of the star that decorated the Viet-Minh flag represented “the five countries of the Indochinese Federation liberated under the supervision of the Vietnamese nation”. The anecdote is not only an outmoded expression of the feverish atmosphere of decolonisation. For Christopher Goscha, it also illustrates the longstanding performative force of the categories forged by several decades of French colonisation in south-east Asia, the first of which was the very concept of Indochina. Those in favour of independence, whether nationalists or communists, were not necessarily hostile to the Indochinese referent, and sometimes went so far as to make it the privileged territorial framework of their future independent state. Moreover, while some colonised groups saw their Indochinese status as an insult that bore the stamp of imperialism, others made it a core part of their identity and proudly laid claim to it. Anyone today who is used to considering Vietnam as the embodiment of a pre-colonial political and cultural entity that resisted attacks from an external force is thus led to ask the question: so how was it possible to be Indochinese?

A professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and renowned specialist in contemporary Vietnamese history, Christopher Goscha was not seeking to use this issue in

order to “undertake yet another ideological or memorial diatribe for or against the merits of “French colonisation” or “Vietnamese colonisation” (p. 157-158). Rather, the persistence of a colonial referent that clashes with the official memory of this period of subjugation led the author of the *Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* to revisit “the complexity of the colonial encounter [and to analyse it] on the basis of a historian’s work” (*ibid.*).

Indeed, the use made by some Vietnamese pro-independence campaigners of the Indochinese referent is only the start of a brief but fascinating enquiry into the negotiated nature of French domination in south-east Asia. *Indochine ou Vietnam*, for which “colonial interactions” (p.7) were the main focus of analysis, was one of Goscha’s first books. Although French readers have had to wait almost 20 years for a translation (and the translation is excellent), the book’s aim has lost none of its strength. It successfully brings to life comments that are all too often abstract, regarding both the colonised people’s “agency” (i.e. capacity to act) and the way in which the colonisers reclaimed certain regional configurations for the purposes of imperial expansion.

## **Indochina, a common creation with variable geometry**

In order to ensure their conquests in south-east Asia would stand the test of time, French administrators in the 1880s quickly had to convince local populations that the Indochinese creation was largely in their own interest. This region was marked by a strong bureaucratic tradition and the project to establish a settlement was never seriously considered; here more than anywhere else the colonisers were obliged to engage the favours of the indigenous people. In order for subordinate administrative posts not to remain vacant, the French relied heavily on the dynamism of the Viet nation, which had been rapidly expanding since the 19<sup>th</sup> century but had found itself hampered by Chinese disdain to the north and Siamese resistance to the west. It was easy for the French to insist on the fact that the Indochinese Union, created in 1887, “did not so much mark a break with the past as a continuity with the imperial future of the Dai Nam [‘imperial state of the south’, the name the Nguyen gave to their state in 1838]” (p.22). Were not Laos and Cambodia – the focus of rivalries between Hue and Bangkok for decades – finally affiliated with a great unified territory in which the Vietnamese played a leading role?

At this point, Christopher Goscha’s book goes beyond a mere study of colonial discourses praising the merits of the Franco-Annamite alliance to the local populations. It shows how their association was established on the ground through a set of very specific measures. In Annam, numerous screenings of films on Cambodian heritage as well as history lessons given in colonial schools, aimed at boosting the secular attachment of the Lao and Khmer people towards the Vietnamese, helped to create an Indochinese identity. In this process, spatial mobility also played a vital role. Annamites associated with the smooth running

of the Union used roads built by the colonisers, while workers on the rubber tree plantations in South Indochina, employees of administrative bureaux of Phnom-Penh and teachers in Lao schools all used the new rail and road network that helped shape the Indochinese economy and administration into coherent systems. And everyone had a new-found appreciation for the distances involved in these journeys thanks to kilometric markers – objectification tools that modified people’s relationship with space. It is therefore not so strange to imagine that Annamites might have considered themselves Indochinese and gone so far as to ask the French authorities in 1938 to speed up the development of Laos in order to further open it up to “Annamite colonisation”. Was that not where Dai Nam found a tangible reality? Following in the footsteps of Benedict Anderson, Goscha thus brings to light a colonial material culture that was conducive to the establishment of an imagined community on the scale of Indochina.

This shared background was by no means the apanage of the Vietnamese collaborators from the French colonisers. The proof lies in its use, after the First World War, by the various actors who demanded a shift in French policy towards greater internal autonomy. Ho-Chi Minh’s *Demands of the Annamite People*, published in 1919, are a prime example of this. They began as follows: “The people of the ancient Empire of Annam, now French Indochina, present to the noble governments...”

And yet, this reclaiming of colonial arguments and Dai Nam’s past sparked lively discussions, which crystallised around the 1930s in what Goscha calls “the great Indochinese debate”. This was a time of intense debates over the form that the Indochinese state would take, revealing the deep fault lines that divided the various nationalist groups at the time.

Those who favoured an equal collaboration between the French and the Indochinese within a reworked state were the first to tear each other apart. On the one hand, the supporters of Pham Quynh promoted a federal system, which they believed was the only one capable of reuniting the three Ky (Cochin China, Annam and Tonkin) and therefore bringing about the rebirth of Dai Nam, which would enable the Annamites to gain control over the Lao and Khmer people at last. For supporters of Nguyen Van Vinh, this objective was far too utopian. Instead, they believed direct government should be prioritised, promoting the rise of a staunchly Indochinese community, since the Annamites would only be granted autonomy on the condition of reconsidering themselves as Indochinese.

However, these hesitations over which political meaning should be assigned to the term “Indochinese” were insignificant compared with the deeper tensions that were causing friction among revolutionary factions with regard to the same issue. Both nationalists and communists were unsure as to the geographical scale on which to base their action. In the wake of the VNQDD (Vietnamese National Party), created at the beginning of 1928, a growing minority of fierce opponents to French colonialism began to reject the Indochinese framework on the grounds of its colonial ties. The post-colonial state these nationalists were calling for had a “Vietnamese” shape (a term which, historically, was just a translation of the name given by the Chinese to the Viet state – Yueh Nan – and, considered too pejorative, had prompted the

Nguyen to choose the term “Dai Nam”). This marked the birth of the movement that successfully imposed its line at the time of independence. However, Christopher Goscha warns against any anachronism. Although this wave of Vietnamese nationalism prevailed in the end, it in no way represented the only possible alternative in the interwar period. In fact, the Indo-Chinese Communist Party was established in 1930. This party, through the authoritarian figure of its leader Ho Chi Minh, provides a perfect illustration of the tensions involved in the “great Indochinese debate”. On the one hand, Ho Chi Minh was drawn to the term Vietnam because it had been born out of the resurgence of Viet nationalism confined to the eastern part of Indochina. On the other hand, he was constrained by the demands of the Comintern to trace the frontiers of revolutionary action along those of the colonial territories. For many young activists, who saw the model of the Soviet Union as an unsurpassable reference, were very drawn to the idea of an Indochinese Union finding its unity in the proletarian status of the Annamite workers scattered throughout the peninsula. The debate was therefore far from settled in the early 1950s.

Incidentally, the Vietnamese option was only imposed by default. The model of the Indochinese Union presupposed that the Lao and Khmer people would agree to being absorbed by a much larger state. This was by no means the case, however. The Cambodians and Lao were among the first to fiercely criticise the Indochinese model and the Franco-Annamite alliance of the 1880s. Marginalised in their own territory by the influx of Annamite workers and civil servants whom the colonisers considered more “hardworking” and “industrious”, they fought long and hard to defend the “Indochinese of the West”. Nevertheless, once again, it should not be thought that the Lao and Khmer response was an expression of a millennial identity in danger. Goscha shows the extent to which a small group of French civil servants in Cambodia and Laos helped to enhance and defend what they defined as a culture particular to western Indochina. Furthermore, the diverse statuses granted to the indigenous Indochinese people greatly helped to reify oppositions between “Annamites” and “Khmers”, and between “Annamites” and “Lao”. These categories, hitherto unknown or shifting, became tools for political management and acquired a new-found tangibility. The obligation to “re-Khmerise” Cambodia, embraced by a number of nationalists from Phnom Penh from the 1930s onwards, was thus largely a result of the political evolution of the Indochinese peninsula from 1880. And the Indochinese project was dealt a fatal blow by the French authorities’ adoption of this new agenda, giving priority to local identities. Under Vichy, resistance to the Japanese occupation led the custodians of colonial authority to exalt many “ancestral traditions” and to support local monarchs (Bao Dai in Annam, Sisavang Vong in Laos and Sihanouk in Cambodia), thus exacerbating tensions between the various Indochinese territories.

French policy became contradictory through its efforts to unify Indochina while protecting the authenticity of its composite nations, and eventually it forced the communists and nationalists down the Vietnamese route. However, until the early 1950s and the final moment of independence, the idea of an Indochinese community was still alive. Since it

embodied the continuation of an imperial project initiated at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was abandoned in many respects with as much difficulty by the Vietnamese as by the French.

## Global history and rejection of teleology

Christopher Goscha's book is of interest firstly because of its focus on the complexity of colonial interactions. Far from establishing these within the "colonisers-colonised" framework, he shows the richness of the "inter-colonial Asian connections" (p.93) that were set in motion by French expansion in the Indochinese peninsula. The attention he gives to the reconfiguration of Vietnamese-Cambodian and Vietnamese-Lao relations is the best example of this. His in-depth analysis of the diversity of actors and ideas in place within each group (Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodia, French) thus shows that the national sieve gives limited results.

Although the approach taken in *Indochine ou Vietnam* cannot be described as "connected" (the original book was written in 1995 and contained fewer than 200 pages), it opens up particularly interesting avenues through its repeated comparisons with the Indonesian situation. Goscha uses the following proposal to avoid the teleological pattern that has led others to see Vietnamese identity as an intangible reality explaining the failure of the "Indochinese model": if a Javanese could see himself as an Indonesian, why could a Vietnamese not consider himself Indochinese? These comparisons are not merely figments of his imagination or a historian's trick to better reflect on past events. Goscha finds explicit references to them in his sources. A Cambodian nationalist writing under the pseudonym IK asked the French authorities in 1937 to separate Cambodia from Indochina, justifying his request with the example of Burma, recently separated from India by the British authorities. *Indochine ou Vietnam* thus brings to light – in a context that is obviously limited by its purpose – a network of comparisons and benchmarking of the colonial management techniques used. In this book, the reader thus finds traces of the author's love of global history applied to the Vietnamese context. Published in 1995, *Indochine ou Vietnam* can be read as the prelude to the collection that Christopher Goscha has been co-editing over the past 20 years at the University of Berkeley: "From Indochina to Vietnam: Revolution and War in a Global Perspective".

"Prelude" is a word that accurately describes this book. It is brilliant in its illustrations (although it would need to make a study of the reception of colonial discourses praising the Franco-Annamite alliance in order to win the reader's complete support), falling somewhat short of the reader's expectations in its conclusion. After a long final chapter on the contradictions of French policy in Indochina, which provides an insight into what drove the revolutionaries to opt for the Indochinese model, Goscha does a final turnaround. He unearths several elements testifying to the persistence of the Indochinese referent in independence discourse. Up until the very last moment, then, the Vietnamese hesitated between two models. But how can one explain the fact that "a businessman from Vietnam today would probably

laugh at the Indochinese concept” (p.57)? There is a gap here that this short book does not fill. In its efforts to avoid the memory debate, it does not provide an answer to the problem raised in the introduction: why did Indochina and Indonesia have such different destinies? The question remains, particularly as Goscha has already shown us that there was nothing inevitable about it – on the contrary, in fact. Rejecting teleology is one thing, while taking account of a memory that is blind to the unfulfilled possibilities is quite another. However, this book is merely a prelude. Any reader who is eager to learn more should turn to the rest of Christopher Goscha’s body of work. *Vietnam or Indochina* is the question. *From Indochina to Vietnam* is the answer.

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