



INTRODUCTION

Andrew Hardy

The chapters of this book explore the potential of long distance labour migration for historical enquiry into a specific context, Vietnam. Their authors are engaged in the study of a set of migrant communities for whom Vietnam was either the point of departure or the place of destination. For the social historian, migrations offer a unique opportunity to study historical change. Migrations produce data that are often measurable and qualitatively rich and can be used to gain social perspectives on political processes and transformations, as well as economic trends and realignments. When groups of people move as a result of a particular transformative historical event, their migrations highlight that event's historical significance and generate records that allow historians to assess its impact at the grassroots. Migrations thus act as a sort of social indicator of political and economic change, leaving traces in archives and popular memory that may not be available for less mobile populations.

The labour migrations studied here are part of the socio-economic history of Vietnam over the century from the 1860s to the 1950s. They shed light on some of the transformative political events of that period, including the French conquest, the two world wars and decolonisation. They also offer economic, social and political insights into the empires of which Vietnam was a part.

At that time, Vietnam stood between three empires. Its government styled itself an empire on the Chinese model and had long operated an effective imperial bureaucracy and a slow but equally effective imperial expansion to the south and west. In the late nineteenth century, this empire was not formally abolished under the terms of the treaties by which Vietnam's government submitted to French conquest. The Vietnamese *ancien régime* was incorporated into the French empire, the Nguyễn-dynasty emperor and his bureaucracy co-opted into its service. And while the country's political relations with China were formally ruptured with the Sino-French treaty of 1885 by which the Chinese empire ceded suzerainty over Vietnam to France, a new relationship with its northern neighbour, mediated by Vietnam's absorption into the French imperial framework, came to replace them.

Indeed, by its inclusion in the French empire, Vietnam found itself embedded in a whole new set of international relations. Vietnam itself was divided into three '*pays*' – named Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina by the French colonial authorities – each with its own



identity, legal status and political regime. These were hitched to Laos and Cambodia as part of a new colonial framework, French Indochina. Within Asia, French mediation developed relations with Siam and Japan and the Asian colonies of other European empires, such as those of the Dutch and the British. Interactions grew with distant, previously unknown lands, including the French territories of the Pacific, the Indian Ocean islands of Réunion and Madagascar, the French colonies in Africa, and France itself, the empire's metropole and centre of political and economic power.

A set of elite migrations symbolised Vietnam's integration into this imperial framework. The 1885 banishment to Tahiti of regent Nguyễn Văn Tường painfully inaugurated the Nguyễn dynasty's association with the French territories of the South Pacific. Other exiles to other lands – the fugitive emperor Hàm Nghi to Algérie in 1888, the deposed emperors Thành Thái and Duy Tân to Réunion in 1916 – came as further evidence of the Vietnamese empire's subordination to the French, but also of the French failure to manage their puppet monarchs. This book is concerned with less illustrious mobile bodies than these, but the migrations of workers discussed here were no less the products of empire. All these journeys raise the same question: what do we learn about empire from the migrations it produced? And by extension, for this is a story of not one but three empires: what do we learn about how these empires interacted from the migrations they organised? In this respect, the chapters shed light on an important aspect of transnational political and social history, embracing territories from Europe across Asia to the Pacific.

20

*

The migrants studied here were imperial subjects and they were labouring subjects: they made their journeys for work. As portrayed in these chapters, they worked in a wide range of contexts, in agriculture, industry, mining and the military. In Vietnam, Vietnamese grew rice and Chinese grew jute on land cleared from highland forests; Vietnamese, Chinese and Javanese harvested rubber on the plantations of the southern plains. In Europe, Vietnamese were among the many Asians who worked in the factories and fought on the battlefields of both world wars. In the Pacific, Vietnamese were among the Asians shipped to the mines and plantations of New Caledonia and the New Hebrides. In all these contexts, state agencies and private companies employed them to work in the service of the economic development, political construction and military defence of France's empire.

To reach their places of work they travelled long distances. Most of them hailed from the plains of Vietnam's northern provinces, an impoverished environment of great





social complexity. By the early twentieth century, the region's growing population density exacerbated the underemployment endemic to its traditional agricultural society, yet employers in its nascent industrial sector found it hard to harness this human resource to the discipline of factory life. Even the poorest only made their labour available at certain times, subject as they were to their home community's demands on their time, in the farm cycle with its short periods of intense activity, and in the social cycle of village and family festivals. Long distance migration removed workers from these social obligations and fostered their adaptation to new regimes and rhythms of work.

As a result, these migrations were movements into modernity. As migrant workers were disciplined into the routines of industrial labour, they experienced the bureaucratisation and industrialisation of modern life, in the administrative procedures of recruitment, in the sights and sounds of travel through cities and ports, in the spending, fining, remitting and saving regimes applied to their earnings, in the postal facilities they used to communicate with their families. For those not cantoned in isolated migrant communities, there was a cultural dimension to this, as migration meant daily contact with distant peoples, whose languages, cultures and political regimes could be starkly unfamiliar. These experiences of western modernity were by no means all positive – mine work in the Pacific could be described as 'voluntary slavery' – but this did not mean that that migrants universally looked back on their old way of life with nostalgia. Migration across imperial space involved cultural shock that could be a form of political eye-opening.

21

Many of these moves were temporary, or were at least intended as so. Workers signed contracts for fixed terms, often five years, that could be renewed but usually ended with a return. Historical events sometimes delayed the journey home, most notably in 1941 when the wartime closure of shipping routes left Vietnamese stranded in both Europe and the South Pacific. But the return of the workers meant the arrival of newly learned habits of industrialised modernity in their home communities, with deep cultural, economic and political impacts.

Finally, and most importantly, these were organised migrations. Most of the workers studied here left home voluntarily. Yet few departed spontaneously, few made their own arrangements for the move. They joined organised migration programmes, and the way those programmes were organised are revealing of the economics of empire and the politics of empire. They inform us of the interaction of public and private economic interests, and the relations of ordinary workers with the respective authorities, French as the dominant imperial power, Vietnamese and Chinese.





Organised migrant labour was fundamental to the imperial project. Without migrant labour, the economic and political integration of many territories could be achieved only on the basis of concessions to local cultures – including the social obligations of the Vietnamese farming communities mentioned above, and those of the Kanak islanders of New Caledonia and the highlanders of Vietnam – that were unacceptable to managers with modern schedules requiring strict timekeeping. This gave Vietnam a strategic position within the French imperial space in the Asia-Pacific, as it held a plentiful supply of cheap labour that could be moved and – away from home – disciplined into industrial production routines.

*

22

Our research is still at an early stage ¹ and at this point the migrants as individuals have only a fugitive presence. This is partly a result of the sources. In the archives, immigration data and employment records contain data on people's name, gender, birth date, place of origin, place of work. Migrant labour was often employed by large companies which have kept archives; there are provincial archives too, such as that of Nam Định province where many migrants came from. Migrants sent letters home and these have, in a few cases, been conserved. Too much time has passed for scholars to interview colonial-era workers, although it is still possible to meet their children. Archival and interview sources can be set alongside literary accounts, such as Jean Vanmai's novels *Chân Đàng* and *Fils de Chân Đàng*, which were written from ethnographic research and offer many insights into the Vietnamese migrant labour experience in New Caledonia. The analysis of such materials is complex and time-consuming, but they are a promising resource for future studies of the migrants' lives, labour and workplaces.

In the meantime, in its initial phase our research has focused on the organisation of migration. This is for two reasons. One is the availability of sources: the archives contain much information on people and processes at higher levels of the social and political hierarchy. The materials used in these chapters consist on the one hand of public

¹ The preliminary findings published here are the result of collaborative research launched in 2018 as part of a research structuring project (*Action de recherche structurante*, ARS) led by the University of Paris Diderot (today the University of Paris) entitled *Migrant workers in the French colonial empire in Asia, the Pacific and the metropole: sources and research perspectives (19th-20th centuries)* coordinated by Eric Guerassimoff, in partnership with UMR 7306 the Institute of Asian Studies (IRASIA), Marseille, the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH, VNU), Hanoi, the Hanoi centre of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, and from January 2019 the IFRAE FRE 2025 at the CNRS.





documents, mainly reports and correspondence produced by colonial, diplomatic and ministry-level officials, and on the other hand of private documents, including the archives of companies involved in the recruitment and employment of migrant labour and records left by the migrants themselves. Organised migration leaves a much more substantial and easily accessible paper trail than does spontaneous migration and the records it generates tend to be about administrative and organisational matters rather than individual migrant experiences.

The second reason is a research priority: we felt that a focus on organisation would provide insights into the political conditions that framed the migration. Our analysis of these conditions works at two levels, policy and implementation. At the level of policy, we follow the activities of the private economic interests involved in recruiting and employing migrant labour, companies like La Ballande, Le Nickel, the Office général de la main-d'œuvre indochinoise. We chart the decisions of state authorities that promoted and regulated their activities: the French government in Paris, colonial governors in the respective territories, state authorities in other parts of the Asia-Pacific. And we examine the interaction between these interest groups, the constant process of negotiation between private companies and public agencies, between France and the colonies, between one colony and another, that produced what we may call “colonial capitalism”.

23

At the level of implementation, policy decisions led to the recruitment, migration and employment of labour. This led to encounters between policy-making bodies and migrant workers, which took place not directly, but by the agency of several types of intermediary, French and Asian. The intermediaries worked on the interface between the workers and the political and economic forces that shaped workers lives, and their identity and actions are thus of political significance. They occupied a variety of functions, and while we have deliberately left the occupational definition of this category as open as possible, we pay attention to several key professions. There were recruiters, involved in identifying, persuading and enrolling men and women to go and work. There were interpreters, hired for their knowledge of the languages of both workers and employers. There were supervisors, known in Vietnamese as *cai* or *đội*, charged with overseeing migrants en route and workers at their place of employment. All of them lived and worked in one of the rare arenas where non-elite Asians were in regular contact with Europeans; their role at this imperial interface gave them power and made them subject to power, making them both subalterns and elites at the same time. In this role, they managed the workforce of empire.

The intermediaries were not just a set of individuals, they were employed within an organisational framework, and that framework too comes under scrutiny in these pages,





in the form of the different institutions that were responsible for recruiting and managing migrant labour. Some of these were Asian, including the imperial bureaucracy of scholar-officials in Vietnam, the imperial authorities in China and the colonial government on the island of Java. Some were French, including both public and private institutions, as well as the emergence of companies that specialised in the recruitment of migrant labour. The migrant labour force itself produced intermediaries: former workers who built on their experience of migration to manage the migration of others. This institutional dimension of the migration phenomenon was of great importance. Decisions to migrate could be collective, familial or individual, but in all these cases, migrant decisions and migrant agency were framed by the opportunities available and the way those opportunities were presented by the institutions and agents responsible for the project's organisation.

This focus on the organisation of migration reflects our political approach to the history of imperial migration. Many of the workers discussed in these pages travelled to work on projects of economic development: the plantations, mines and factories owned and operated by French and other colonial capitalists. But these economic projects were not apolitical, quite the contrary: the '*mise en valeur*' of France's colonial territories was a political enterprise too. To legitimise their rule in lands they saw as under-populated and unproductive, the makers of imperial policy felt they had to fill those lands with productive activity. In the southern and highland regions of Indochina, and on the islands of New Caledonia and the New Hebrides, their call for migrant labour responded to a political as well an economic imperative. It is, indeed, this mix of economic and political impulse that makes the study of organised migration so useful to the historians of empire.

24

*

What was the extent of this French empire that sought to redistribute its working subjects across such distances? We are concerned here with the French imperial space in the Asia-Pacific region. This was an incoherent and fragmented set of territories acquired by France at different times over the nineteenth century. It included the islands of New Caledonia and the New Hebrides, a network of enclaves along the coast of China, and – the latest in date and largest in size and population – the eastern flank of the Southeast Asian peninsula, including Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Indochina was the heart of France's presence in the Asia-Pacific and some 1920s colonial discourse even imagined Indochina as a 'second metropole' for the region.





At the heart of the Indochina project was Vietnam. One dimension of that project was Vietnam's partition between three 'pays' – Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina – but this was balanced, even contradicted by another policy, which was the development of Indochina's 'under-populated' south and west: the Mekong Delta, the Central Highlands, the plains of Cambodia, the valleys of Laos. For this, Vietnamese migrants were essential. Indeed, the French project in Indochina depended heavily on Vietnamese migration, both as its workforce in the plantations and as its clerks, managers and merchants in the towns. In the wake of French-organised employment opportunities, networks of spontaneous migration developed to link certain Vietnamese provinces with specific parts of Laos and Cambodia: from Nam Định migrants often went to Vientiane, from Nghệ An to Thakhek, from Huế to Pakse. A majority of the migrants came from Tonkin and the northern provinces of Annam.

On their main territory in the South Pacific, New Caledonia, the French sought to turn a penal territory into a respectable settler colony. Economic development was part of this, modelled on the Australian experience. The Australians had achieved it with a mixture of European and Chinese labour, and the authorities in Nouméa too preferred an imported workforce to the local Kanaks. From the late nineteenth century, they brought in workers from other Pacific islands, from Japan and from Java, with the first Vietnamese arriving in 1891. During the 1920s and 1930s, more than 14,000 Vietnamese arrived to work in New Caledonia, employed as indentured labour on five-year contracts.

The French imperial presence in China consisted of an 'archipelago' of territories ceded to France in the nineteenth century, including a fairly large, industrialised enclave at Guangzhouwan and urban concessions in ports such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin. Diplomatic representation was established in other ports open to foreign trade, where small French communities headed by a consul looked after France's economic interests. In the early twentieth century, Vietnamese migrants to China were few in number and occupationally specific, consisting of anti-colonial revolutionaries in the south, bureaucrats and translators in Guangzhouwan, and police in the French concession in Shanghai. But Chinese did travel to Vietnam. Most were spontaneous migrants, coolies and traders participating in the circulations of Southeast Asia's 'South Seas' (*Nanhai*) trade. But some signed contracts as migrant workers, and in doing so passed through the imperial networks that are the concern of this book. For the most part, the workers were not recruited in the French concessions but in China proper, which meant that the organisation of their migration had to be negotiated and regulated between the two empires. These Chinese workers hired by or via European agents were only few hundreds at the beginning of the 20th century against a community of about 200,000 Chinese fed by 'spontaneous' flows,



living and prospering in Indochina in 1908, and double that figure twenty-five years later.

The other territory in this French imperial space was, of course, France. French people migrated through the networks it created, to and from Indochina, the Chinese concessions and the territories of the Pacific. But until the First World War, non-elite inhabitants of the Asia-Pacific rarely made their way to France: the few Vietnamese there were students, most of them children of wealthy families in the south. This changed in 1915, with the recruitment of Vietnamese labour to work in the factories and on the battlefields of wartime France. Colonial authorities regarded this experiment with unskilled workers (*ouvriers non spécialisés*, as they were called) as a success, judging by their decision to repeat it at the start of the Second World War. 90,000 Vietnamese travelled to France in the first war; 20,000 in the second.

Workers from other parts of Asia also found themselves travelling through the networks created by this imperial space. In addition to the Chinese already mentioned, two other groups appear in these pages. Japan was a source of labour in the early years of New Caledonia's economic development. But from 1900, the government in Tokyo insisted that Japanese workers be afforded the rights and salaries of visiting foreign citizens. A similar issue faced the authorities in Indochina, who sought manpower from Java for their plantations in Cochinchina but balked at the Dutch authorities' insistence that this labour should be regulated. While Javanese workers continued to travel to New Caledonia, the complications and costs that arose in negotiations between the respective imperial authorities tended to exclude migrants from outside the French empire and led employers to favour Vietnamese workers. Experiments with external recruitments served, in fact, to keep the networks and institutions of labour migration within French imperial space and to reinforce the position of Vietnamese labour within them.

*

The book has three parts, which correspond to its three main ambitions. The first is to establish a chronological and geographical framework for the Vietnamese migrations under study here. This is the aim of the first part, entitled *Les dynamiques impériales des migrations vietnamiennes*. Mobilities associated with the Nguyễn-dynasty imperial framework of Vietnam are the focus of its first two chapters. Emmanuel Poisson assesses the importance of the mobility of scholar-officials (*quan*) to the proper functioning of the imperial bureaucracy, while Andrew Hardy examines the social and political dynamics of a state-organised migration project launched in the 1860s to defend the country against French invasion.





The next chapters explore three contexts of Vietnamese labour migration organised within the framework of French imperial space in the early twentieth century. Tran Xuan Tri's study of the plantations of southern Vietnam describes the failed early experiments with Javanese and Chinese labour, before employers settled on northern Vietnam for their labour source: this chapter traces the process of trial and error that accompanied the emergence of Tonkin as Cochinchina's main source of imported labour. The northern provinces also provided the vast majority of migrants examined by Yann Bencivengo in his chapter on Vietnamese workers recruited from the 1920s to work the mines of the company Le Nickel in New Caledonia. The factories of Second World War France were the destination of migrants studied by Liêm-Khê Luguern, recruited by the same Nguyễn-dynasty bureaucracy studied in the first two chapters, which now worked in the higher imperial interests of France: adopting a spatial approach, this study finds that most of the workers thus recruited came from Vietnam's central region.

The first part concludes with a chapter on a migration event associated with Vietnam's decolonisation. During the 300-day implementation period of the Geneva Agreement, arrangements were made for all Vietnamese to choose and move to the zone – north or south – they wished to live in. This was not a labour migration, but it was an organised migration, with shipping and reception facilities provided and the registration of migrant departures and arrivals in Haiphong and Saigon. It was, above all, a political migration, as Nguyen Phi-Vân shows here, not only in the event but also in the representations the event received both at the time and afterwards. Most spectacularly of all the chapters here, her study illustrates our earlier point that migrations allow us to measure the social impact of the great political transformations of history, in this case the end of empire.

The second part – entitled *L'intermédiation dans l'organisation des migrations impériales* – presents the first results of our research into intermediaries. It consists of four monograph studies of specific intermediate groups, networks or institutions. The first two focus on northern Vietnamese migrants recruited for work in the mines of New Caledonia. Sarah Mohamed-Gaillard looks at the policy-making processes that led to the establishment in the 1920s of this flow of labour migration: she outlines the inter-colonial networks and interplay of public and private interests that underpinned the imperial migrations of Vietnamese to the Pacific. Johann Gremont follows up with a study of the implementation of these policies through the recruitment of Tonkinese workers: his focus is the people who did the actual recruiting, both the French private companies set up for that purpose and the Vietnamese recruitment agents, who toured the districts of the northern delta in search of volunteers. Gremont's study opens with an event – the assassination of the director of the



main French recruiting company by a nationalist revolutionary organisation – that reminds us of the political implications of these activities that might otherwise appear of exclusively economic significance.

In the other two chapters of this part, our attention turns to the organisation of Chinese labour migration. Eric Guerassimoff looks at the recruitment of Chinese in Fuzhou for employment in the northern Vietnamese highlands: he brings to light a whole hierarchy of intermediary social and political brokers who mediated between employers and workers. These include French imperial actors like the recruiting agent and the consul, the Chinese imperial authorities and their emigration department, and the Asian supervisors led by the all-important ‘Chinese director’, responsible for the day-to-day management of the labour force. Recruitment is also the subject of Olga Alexeeva’s monograph on the interpreters hired to accompany Chinese migrant workers sent to work in the factories of First World War France. French officials overcame difficulties in recruiting them in China by hiring the interpreters among the Chinese inhabitants of Vietnam. Finding educated Chinese volunteers for a migration to wartime Europe was not a simple task even in Indochina, but recruiting within French imperial space was less difficult than recruiting outside it.

28 The book’s third part – *Documenter les migrations impériales, de l’archive au roman* – focuses on a concern shared by all the book’s authors: what sources and methods are available for the study of imperial migrations? On the basis of documents conserved in the French overseas archives, archivist Olivia Pelletier answers this question with reference to Vietnamese workers who travelled to France: her study describes the administrative framework that organised their migrations and outlines the documents it produced that allow historians to study them. Historian Isabelle Merle and archivist Christophe Dervieux do the same for the story of imperial migration in the French Pacific. They outline the history of imported labour there and present a sample of the archives available in Nouméa and Hanoi for the study of Vietnamese contract workers in New Caledonia. The final chapter, by historian Nguyen Phuong Ngoc, reveals the value for historians of literary sources – in this case a 1927 novel recounting the migration experience of a Vietnamese soldier sent to France during the First World War – in terms of the information they contain and the questions they raise.

*

Standing alone, each of these monographs offers a carefully researched portrait of a chapter in the economic and social history of Vietnam: the migration of a community of





men, women and sometimes children, the organisation of that migration from recruitment to return, the management conditions of their employment. Whether the destination was a plantation in Vietnam, a mine in New Caledonia or a factory in France, these studies are important contributions to the history of migration and the history of work. And because they are migration studies, as noted at the start of this introduction they give a grassroots perspective on the great events of Vietnam's colonial history, documenting the impact on working people of Vietnam's conquest, experience of the world wars and decolonisation, as well as the economic transformations of colonial modernity.

Taken as a whole, these studies offered two further insights. First, the collection's spatial focus on the French-governed territories of the Asia Pacific, and its chronological focus on the period of Vietnam's colonisation brings the French imperial space into sharp relief. In a world that was employing vast numbers of Chinese workers, the employers of the French empire preferred Vietnamese labour; even the interpreters for Chinese workers were hired in Vietnam. This was because the legal and administrative structures of the French empire favoured the employment, often on exploitative terms, of workers within the empire. In such a framework, the densely populated provinces of Tonkin and northern Annam secured for Vietnam a central place within the imperial migration system. Vietnamese migrant workers connected the disparate territories and peoples of the French empire. As long as sufficient distance could be set between themselves and their home village and its social obligations, these northern Vietnamese were the workhorse of empire.

Second, the collection's focus on the organisation of migration has shed new light on the governance of empire. From our knowledge of the intermediate agents and institutions that organised imperial migrations, we learn about how the French empire operated, at the local level, as a set of transnational networks, and in its interactions with the Vietnamese and Chinese empires. The intermediaries who appear in these pages were cogs in the Asia-Pacific sector of a global imperial system, whose institutions, hierarchies, personal relationships, internal contradictions, founded on the racist subordination of lives across Asia and the Pacific to European interests, are revealed here in action. The historian observes them through the contracts, correspondence and written communications without which that system could not have functioned. In this sense, the study of migrants yields knowledge of more than migration; it offers more even than a grassroots perspective on historical change. This history of mobile Vietnamese labour gives unique insights into the structures, networks and functioning of the French global system. It shows how empire transcended territory, and counter-intuitively perhaps, how, as they moved across imperial spaces, the migrants and their intermediaries embodied imperial power.