

# TROPICALITY AND TOPICALITY: PIERRE GOUROU AND THE GENEALOGY OF FRENCH COLONIAL SCHOLARSHIP ON RURAL VIETNAM

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the relevance of the work of Pierre Gourou for Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese scholarship on colonial and postcolonial rural society in Vietnam. The term “tropicality” is used to situate Gourou’s work within the framework of both French and Vietnamese regimes of truth. It is argued that Gourou was aware of the complex human geographies of the tropics and monsoon Asia and the challenges this posed to both Western and “tropical” peoples. Gourou and the issue of tropicality is used to show that Vietnamese scholars did not completely reject French colonial systems of knowledge, and that decolonisation did not herald a complete shift in knowledge about rural Vietnam. Rather, since the 1940s there has been antagonism and accommodation between colonial and postcolonial, French and Vietnamese modes of knowledge production. While Gourou underscored the otherness of the tropics, and there are colonial overtones in his work, he had an immense influence on indigenous ethnography and geography in Vietnam and elsewhere in the formerly colonised world. The article traces this important influence and how it has been both questioned and affirmed since independence in the Vietnamese context. It is suggested that the humanistic approach that Gourou pioneered in his 1936 study of the Red River Delta of northern Vietnam has outlived and been able to overcome the setbacks and drawbacks of both colonial and revolutionary/Vietnamese politico-intellectual projects.

*Keywords:* human geography, tropicality, Vietnam, Red River Delta, village studies

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## INTRODUCTION

Most contemporary scholars of Vietnam are familiar with two famous works by French geographers from the colonial period: Charles-Edouard Robequain’s *Le Thanh Hoa* (1929) and Pierre Gourou’s *Les paysans du delta tonkinois* (1936a). These two works continue to work as baseline studies of the relations between “man and milieu” which, together with work by some other geographers (e.g. Henry,

1932; Dumont, 1995), still offer the most comprehensive analysis of Vietnamese rural life under French colonial rule. My personal interest in the work of these geographers, and of Gourou in particular, stems from my PhD work in the late 1970s, which dealt in part with the nature of French knowledge about Indochina. I did long stretches of research in the Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer (CAOM)

in Aix-en-Provence, and there encountered the ample published and unpublished research of French scholars like Gourou, who were among the first to carry out extensive research in the countryside of colonial Indochina. Subsequently, in the early 1990s, when I returned to the colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence as well as in Hanoi in connection with an anthropological study I undertook of a village in the Red River Delta (Kleinen, 1999), I was again struck by the richness of the data that Gourou and others collected. Indeed, as recent Vietnamese scholarship intimates, and as I want to suggest in this paper, the geographical knowledge created by Gourou especially has an intrinsic value that has seemingly transcended the ruptures of war and revolution. This realisation was bolstered by the appearance in 2003 of the first Vietnamese translation of Gourou's 1936 masterpiece *Les paysans*. While this translation, by the agronomist Dao The Tuan does not come with a critical introduction, it bears witness to the fallacy, in the Vietnamese context, of the postcolonial fiction of radical discontinuity, at least at an intellectual level. Vietnamese scholars have not completely rejected French systems of knowledge; decolonisation and independence did not lead to a complete overhaul in the production of knowledge about rural Vietnam. Rather, there has been antagonism and accommodation between colonial and postcolonial systems of knowledge production.

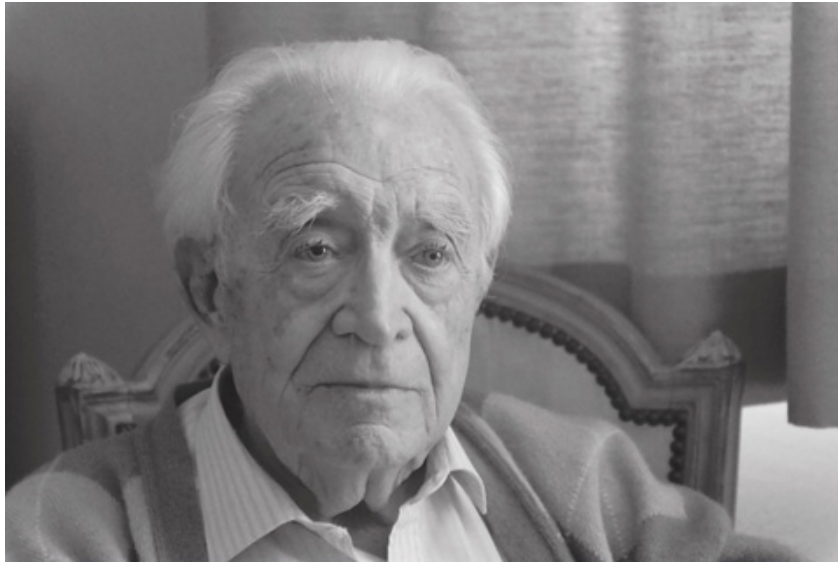
Reflecting on my own research experience, and against the backdrop of contemporary Vietnam, I want to use Gourou to think both positively and critically about the nature and legacies of French scholarship on Indochina during the late colonial period (roughly 1925–50). The paper traces aspects of the politico-intellectual genealogy through which the work of figures such as Gourou was implicated in France's colonial project and later embraced, extended and contested by Vietnamese scholars in the postcolonial era. I use the term “genealogy” in a double sense. In the first place, I use it to elude to the webs of personal

and professional affiliation between French and Vietnamese scholars that developed in colonial times – not least between Gourou and his field assistants, a number of whom went on to become important scholars and politicians in postcolonial Vietnam. But I also use the term “genealogy” in a more critical Foucauldian, sense to capture the notion that the production and consumption of knowledge about Vietnam has been marked by relations of inclusion and exclusion.

Using the work of Pierre Gourou (Plate 1) and his Vietnamese assistants as my prime example, I start with an examination of French colonial scholarship on Indochina during the interwar years and then move to a discussion of Gourou's Vietnamese legacy. Among other things, my paper seeks to show that war, revolutionary struggle and the postcolonial politico-intellectual search for understandings of Vietnamese history and civilisation that were less tightly gripped by French ideas, methods and categories of knowledge did not lead to a blanket rejection of French scholarship. Rather, the type of knowledge produced and imparted by Gourou and other French scholars was paralleled by, and selectively incorporated into, Vietnamese research projects. Vietnamese scholars dwelt on a number of key themes in Vietnamese social and political life – the centrality of the village, for example – that animated Gourou (and later Paul Mus). Conceived thus, the paper hopefully reminds us that some of the formative connections between French colonialism, decolonisation and what others in this Special Issue call “tropicality” can be found in the messy pragmatics of intellectual exchange across cultural and colonial divides.

## GOUROU AND THE SCIENCE OF FRENCH COLONIALISM

Gourou (1900–99) and Robequain (1890–1967) had a close professional relationship first in Indochina, then, after the Second World War, as geography professors in Paris at the Collège de France and Sorbonne respectively, where



*Plate 1. Pierre Gourou, Brussels, 1994. Photo courtesy of author.*

they promoted French geographical research in the tropical world. Their work on Indochina marks the first serious attempt by French scholars to systematically analyse the relations between land and life in northern Vietnam and bring French geographical ideas and methods to bear on one of France's key colonial possessions. They produced two incredibly detailed, regionally focused field studies, and upon their return to France in the mid-1930s wrote more general and widely influential books on the economy and land use of Indochina (Robequain, 1935, 1944; Gourou, 1945).

Robequain was a member of France's principal research institute in the Far East, the Hanoi-based *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) established in 1900, and spent most of 1924-25 in the second largest delta of northern Vietnam, the plain of Thanh Hoa, which the French regarded as the pre-Chinese cradle of Vietnamese civilisation (see Parmentier, 1918; Goloubew, 1929). By the 1920s the region had become a privileged field site for Western and Vietnamese scientists working within an Orientalist paradigm that was bent on discerning the "essence" of Vietnamese history

and identity (see Bayly, 2000). One possible reason for Robequain's regional study might have been the fact that colonial policies for internal migration to alleviate the congested Tonkin Delta were already in the making and the province of Thanh Hoa had been selected as a testing ground for them. In any event, Robequain's study heralded the advance of a certain type of French science into a landscape hitherto unstudied in France (Bréelle, 2002:171-75).

Gourou did something similar, if on a larger scale. His work on the Red River Delta, which culminated in a 660-page study, was the result of a nearly 10-year stay in the region. Still considered a landmark of rural sociology, *Les paysans* probably remains the work most quoted by contemporary scholars of Vietnam. Defended as a doctoral thesis in December 1936 at the Faculty of Letters at the Sorbonne, it was published by EFEO in Paris in the same year. Gourou's comprehensive account of the human geography of the Red River Delta was unmatched at the time, and war and revolution made it virtually impossible to embark on similar studies thereafter. On re-reading *Les paysans*, the contemporary fieldworker is still struck by

the hugeness and the accuracy of Gourou's data. The problems that faced the inhabitants of this densely populated delta during the 1930s still appear to exist, albeit in a different context.

The bulk of Gourou's fieldwork took place between the end of 1931 and the summer of 1935. The alluvial plain of the Red River Delta then comprised of more than 8,000 villages, the habitat of about 6.5 million peasants, spread out on a surface of about 15,000 km<sup>2</sup> and relatively accessible by road. Being a paid official of the colonial school system (Gourou taught at the prestigious Lycée Albert Sarraut in Hanoi), he was only able to go to the field on Sundays and during school holidays, especially the summer vacation between June and September. Another drawback in terms of scholarship was that living among the local population was simply "not done", as Vietnamese people viewed French scholars associated with the *lycées* and EFEO as part of the colonial state apparatus. *Les paysans* was preceded by two publications that Gourou produced for the colonial government: *L'Indochine française* (1929), written for the 4th Scientific Congress of the Pacific held in Java in 1929, and *Le Tonkin* (1931), occasioned by the *Exposition Coloniale* in Paris, which can be read as a working draft of the larger study of the delta that was to follow.

Recent commentators have shown how Robequain and Gourou extended and adapted the regional paradigm of French geographical inquiry pioneered by Paul Vidal de la Blache to colonial settings and conditions (see Claval, 1998:98-110; Bréelle, 2002; Bowd & Clayton, 2005) – a paradigm characterised by its focus on regional distinctiveness and rural *genres de vie* (ways of life) and its commitment to fastidious fieldwork. While much can be said about such important disciplinary considerations, the point at hand is that they should not be considered in isolation from wider colonial dynamics of knowledge production and the consumption of geographical knowledge by French and Vietnamese

audiences. In metropolitan terms, the work of Robequain and Gourou became part of a space, symbolised by the *Exposition Coloniale*, "within which various systems of representation and different discourses on the Other came together to 'materialize' exotic cultures" (Norindr, 1996:15). The peasants and landscapes of northern Vietnam were rendered as real yet exotic, as actors inhabiting landscapes that were in many ways entirely different from French landscapes. And as Pierre Singaravélou (1999) has argued, French scholars worked in a context where their ability to materialise exotic cultures was deemed to have important practical and ideological implications for colonial rule.

One way in which Gourou, a nominally independent scholar, became important in these metropolitan and colonial processes of materialisation and exoticisation was through his focus on the Vietnamese village, which he deemed to be the fulcrum of Vietnamese social and political organisation. Yet the colonial project during this period was by no means monolithic (see Kleinen, 1997). While, in Gourou's hands, the village became an important locus of scholarship and debate, colonial research did not halt at the village boundary, nor at the bamboo hedges erected around villages in the northern part of Vietnam. It is important to emphasise the diversity of – and, following Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hemery (1995; 2001), the ambiguity in – the production of French colonial knowledge in Indochina. The distinguished French historian Georges Boudarel (1976:158-59), for instance, who spent many years in Vietnam, could find no direct connections between ethnographic, sociological and historical-geographical studies on the one hand, and the decisions of the colonial state on the other. In a strict sense, this claim holds true for the work of Gourou. While *Les paysans* and *L'utilisation du sol en Indochine française* (1940) were widely read in France and Indochina, neither work was a policy study commissioned or used by the French colonial administration in any direct way. However, the dividing line between such

studies and those written on contract remained quite thin. The establishment of the Agronomic Office in 1925 and related agencies of knowledge production, like EFEO, made it easy for the French colonial government to cull information and direct studies for its own purposes (see Brocheux & Hemery, 1995:126-27; Cleary, this issue). During the 1930s and 1940s the colonial state also became aware of increasing range of research conducted by Vietnamese scholars on the scope and complexity of rituals and ceremonies. At EFEO, the importance of Vietnamese personnel to colonial scientific research was evidenced by an increase in the employment of research assistants, secretaries, archivists and interpreters or translators of texts.

Such Vietnamese knowledge producers and go-betweens were attached to the French educated elite of the indigenous population and, on the face of it, might appear to have been important brokers in the power/knowledge relationship sketched by Norindr (1996) and Singaravelou (1999). Vietnamese employees of EFEO generally enjoyed easier access to the countryside than their French colleagues, and many maintained close contacts with their native villages. Theoretically, they had a privileged stake in the apparatus of colonial control. But this image is somewhat misleading, for as Boudarel (1987:9) recounts, Vietnamese careers were carefully controlled and curtailed by EFEO; indigenous employees were granted more lowly positions and more limited career options than their French colleagues. Political considerations also impacted the nature and limits of academic freedom among the French scholars associated with EFEO. Boudarel (1976:145-52; 1987:15) suggests that they tacitly agreed to a policy of self-censorship and eschewed open criticism of the colonial venture.

The foundation of the Institute for Social Studies (Institut Indochinois pour l'Etude de l'Homme, IIEH) in Hanoi in 1938 marked a shift in orientation in colonial knowledge

production towards more specialised rural fieldwork. Together with EFEO, it embarked on an important project: to collect customary law codes (*coutumiers*) from Vietnamese villages, which, in turn, would facilitate administrative reforms in the countryside. EFEO had gained experience with a similar program in the early 1920s when its researchers collected and published the codes of Vietnam's ethnic groups and tribes – codes that had never existed in a written form. These were used as instruments to define the nationhood of the tribes (Salemink, 1999). The work of the Vietnamese researchers who did the fieldwork in the villages in the late 1930's remained unfinished and their notes and drawings, which are housed in the Han-Nom Institute in Hanoi, remain silent witnesses to an important body of knowledge that disappeared into the fog of war and revolution and now await further study.

As this discussion suggests, EFEO can be described as a research stimulating as well as intellectually disciplining institution in which patron-client relationships dominated (see Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The institution was characterised by a hierarchical order that separated French from Vietnamese scholars and aggravated the colour line between coloniser and colonised which infused France's colonial endeavour in Indochina. EFEO can also be viewed as a partner in a process of state simplification or colonial governmentality. Indochina provided no exception to the wider colonial attempt to govern alien lands and indigenous peoples through projects of classification and enumeration – through the delineation and codification of a few primal units of colonial analysis and management, such "tribe" and "village" (see Scott, 1996). Institutions like EFEO and others such as the Association des Amis du Vieux Hue (Association of Friends of the Old City of Hue) and Société des Etudes Indochinoises de Saigon (SEIS) were directly implicated in this process in Southeast Asia. As EFEO personnel wrote about the Vietnamese past, they shared in what, in a wider

colonial register, has been viewed as “the invention” of Vietnamese tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

Colonial developments in Indochina during the 1930s bring these connections between knowledge and power into vivid relief. French colonial policy on agricultural development became more hotly debated around 1930, when the world economic crisis hit Indochina and Vietnamese nationalism threatened the colonial state with episodes of urban and rural unrest. As Daniel Hemery (1977:11-12) has shown, the colonial government took the question of agrarian poverty seriously and admitted that some of the causes of political turmoil lay in the growing polarity within the countryside between landlords and peasants. French colonial scholarship, including geographical works like Gourou's, was produced, read and debated in this light. For example, the colonial agronomist Yves Henry produced a huge inventory of land use and control entitled *L'Economie agricole de l'Indochine* (1932). His survey was conducted during a period of serious social unrest, which led to the quality of his work being questioned. Gourou (1936a:357), for example, suggested that Henry's surveys provided “a very approximate view of reality” and later scholars (e.g. Ngo, 1973; Murray, 1980) have warned against the extensive use of Henry's work. Yet Henry provided a timely analysis of agrarian dynamics that remained obscure to the colonial administrations in northern and southern Vietnam and also points to France's determination at this juncture to discern the material roots of social and political unrest.

France's Popular Front Government (1936-37) endeavoured to put serious social reforms into effect. Money and time proved to be major obstacles, allowing metropolitan policies and vested interests of influential sectors of French society to seriously hinder a comprehensive application of such development policies (Hemery, 1977:3-35; Marr, 1981:24). The modernisation of the technical and scientific infrastructure of the colony, consequently,

remained under-developed. Yet we should not lose sight of the increasingly development-minded nature of French colonial policy during this period and its articulation with studies like Henry's.

Gourou gives us another example of how metropolitan concerns and colonial anxieties over the direction of French colonial rule during the 1930s became entangled with a set of ostensibly scholarly concerns. As the head of the Agronomic Office, Yves Henry appeared as an expert witness for a special criminal court set up to investigate the anti-colonial and nationalist Nghe-Tinh rebellion of 1930-31. Whether or not Gourou had worked in the Nghe-Tinh region of north central Vietnam at the time of the rebellion is not clear, nor is there any indication that he was involved in the activities of the criminal court. Upon his return to France in 1936, however, Gourou was asked to assist the Guernut Commission (named after Henri Guernut, Minister of National Education in the Blum Cabinet), which was set up by the Popular Front Government to deal with criticisms of French colonial rule (See Kleinen, 1988; Hérody, 2004). In a lengthy report, Gourou spelt out the “pathological” demographic situation of the Tonkin Delta, at the time one of the “most densely populated agricultural areas in the world”.<sup>1</sup> The document reads like a development cooperation programme. Gourou stresses the need for modernising the agricultural base of the northern Vietnamese economy through improved agricultural techniques and sketched proposals for land reform and for the development of village handicrafts and small-scale industry. Most of these proposals remained dead words, however, largely because of the short time in which the Commission was able to do its work. By March 1937 the Commission was already curbed financially and, subsequently, disbanded along with the Popular Front itself.

Gourou also touched upon questions of colonial administration and development in *Les paysans*, but did so in more guarded, and in some respects ambivalent, terms. He

describes the reconstruction of the Tonkin landscape by the French as a “contamination”; Catholic churches, for example, are depicted as “strange elements in the surrounding countryside” (Gourou, 1936a:567). For Gourou, the Tonkin landscape represented “the perfect bond established between man and nature.... Outside this [state of affairs], there is only disorder and despair” (p. 575). Modern school buildings were erected without much understanding for this environment, he wrote, though he saw the reformed indigenous school system and French medical provision as French gifts to the Tonkin peasants. Gourou favoured moderate land reform, but limits his assessment to a slowdown in the expansion of large grants and holdings (the so-called *concessions*). He touches on the several taxation measures that the French took to finance their colonial enterprise and deplored France’s monopolies on salt and alcohol (surprisingly, he did not deal with opium). For the most part, however, and as Gavin Bowd and Daniel Clayton (2003) have argued, nowhere in his writings can we find a systematic concern with French colonisation. In this regard Gourou differed from his contemporary René Dumont (1995:xxxiv), who had witnessed the bloody reverberations of the nationalist uprising in the provincial town of Yen Bai near Hanoi, and, some 40 years later at an anti-Vietnam War conference in New York, suggested that “the first day of the Indo-China war [was] 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1930, and I was against war made by the French” (see also Bruneau, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Gourou’s political position at this juncture was much more ambivalent and he subsequently shirked discussion of the war in Vietnam (see Dupont, 2000); even at its height in 1972 his colleagues and admirers did not ever mention the war (Barrère *et al.*, 1972).

Direct criticism of the colonial state is nearly absent in Gourou’s work (see Gourou, 1936a:267-68, 572-73). In *Les paysans* he largely repeats what he wrote in 1931 in *Le Tonkin* about “the generous character of the French protectorate of Tonkin” (Gourou,

1931:347). At the height of the First Indochina War (1946-55) he was still convinced of the blessings of colonial leadership, proposing France as the sole and natural arbiter of an Indochinese federation (see Gourou, 1947; Bowd & Clayton, 2005; Bruneau, this issue). But what Gourou did do, and what impressed Vietnamese scholars, was comment incisively on the importance and venality of the village elites. As Popkin (1979:183) has remarked, Gourou “admired the way that Vietnamese peasants were integrated into their villages”. There was “a strict tyranny” at work in the villages, Gourou (1936a: 577) argued, but “the peasant finds in village life powerful motives of his interest: ambition, intrigue, the taste of power, religious sentiment, all these serve his appetite sufficiently; thanks to the intense and well organised village life, the peasant is more than a miserable and ill-fed serf” (p. 575). “This hard-working peasantry” represents a “balanced and sensible civilization” (p. 578).

In a footnote, Gourou (1936a:272) shows that he was cognisant of the colonial implications of his work:

It is clear that the Annamese village represents for the government an easy and simple “governing machine”: it governs itself; it is responsible for the payments of the taxes based on solidarity and its task to uphold authority is very limited; on the other side the intrigues and rivalries of the parties concerned enable the mandarins always to be informed about what happens in the commune and to intervene in case when the commune might become the place of suspect turbulence.

Altering the village, he argued, “would deprive the peasants of what little happiness they had” (Gourou, 1936a:577). This did not necessarily mean that he saw the corporate village as a harmonious community. In passages in *Les paysans* that borrow from the pro-French journalist and writer Nguyen Van Vinh, Gourou

(1936a:269-72) dwells on institutionalised competition and opposition within the village, and inter-elite conflict.<sup>3</sup> Another journalist and writer, Ngo Tat To, whose writings Gourou must have known, attacked what he called “the sombre receptacle of rotten customs and monstrous and barbaric traditions behind the bamboo hedge” (cited in Boudarel, 1991:89). The manipulation of land allotments, taxes and registrations by village elites, the main topics of his *Tap an cai dinh* (Deliberations in the Communal House) and *Viec lang* (Affairs of the Village) published in 1939 and 1940 respectively (Ngo Tat To, 1977: 143-208, 209-304), were concerns also shared by his one-time colleague at EFEO, Nguyen Van Huyen. Although Gourou does not say so directly, it appears that these Vietnamese writers were instrumental in convincing him of the need to take the village seriously and, importantly, not to romanticise its timeless qualities. He regretted that EFEO had neglected the study of village customs (Gourou, 1936a:264), but at the same time brought an air of exoticism to this discussion by representing the strengths and weaknesses of the Vietnamese village system as essentially Vietnamese and placing the material and psychological aspects of colonial incursion in the background. It was Gourou’s contemporary and friend, Paul Mus (1949), who went on to popularise the view that the (northern) Vietnamese village was the basic unit of Vietnamese society, a unit from which the Vietnamese derived their social characteristics and revolutionary fervour. But this idea stems from Gourou, and Mus recorded his intellectual debt to him by quoting him as an expert on village affairs.

Gourou also introduced two further concepts that are still superb instruments with which to understand the forces of the current market liberalisation in northern Vietnam. In his description of why handicraft villages went in for rigid specialisation, he raised the question of “symbiotic village relationships” and “monopolies of specialisation” (1936a: 575-84). Gourou felt that villages resorted to “tradition” as a means of monopolising the

practice of certain handicrafts through a strict division of labour between villages in order to keep those skills alive by strictly assigning to particular communities (Abrami, 1995).

In *Les paysans*, Gourou stressed the ecological adaptation of northern Vietnamese rice farmers to their environment, and herein lies the sum of the elements of the paradigm of “tropical geography” that Gourou went on to build and tower over at Collège de France. He was more concerned with the influence of internal factors such as history, culture environment and civilisation than with external influences such as colonialism. His postwar focus on the landscape-producing capacity and strategies (*techniques d’encadrement*) of the peoples in the tropics is a case in point, for this concept and methodology minimises the influence of colonialism and state intervention. Gourou’s paradigm came under attack during the 1970s by French academics (including geographers) who called themselves “*tiermondistes*” (“thirdworldists”) and favoured more radical approaches (many of them Marxist) to issues of development and social change (see Bruneau & Dory, 1994; Raison, this issue).<sup>4</sup> More recently, Bowd and Clayton (2003:163) fuelled debate about Gourou’s fieldwork in the delta by introducing David Arnold’s concept of tropicality and regarding Gourou’s representation of the Red River Delta as a “multifaceted space of knowledge that incorporated ideas, experiences and representations from geography, Orientalism, colonialism and tropicality”. Bowd & Clayton (2005) also see in Gourou’s fieldwork the seeds of a longer-term scholarly project that rendered tropicality as a geographical science of othering that fused science and symbolism, and obfuscated the role that colonialism played in the “development” of the tropics (also see Frenkel, 2002; Bankoff, 2003).

The point that I wish to labour here is that Gourou’s construction of the Tonkin Delta was the product of a particular author at a particular time, in a particular place. But, implicit in this

critical discussion, to which I now turn, is the notion that out of the power-laden entanglements of colonialism (in which Gourou participated) came a body of knowledge and set of connections with Vietnamese scholars that has had a more enduring significance. The topicality of Gourou's work lies not just in what it says about the relationship between geography, colonialism and tropicality in Indochina, but also in his open and clear devotion to the Vietnamese peasants he studied. At one level, his methodological approach was akin to the modern anthropological quest to render native informants as objects of analysis along the temporal and spatial axes of othering described by many postcolonial scholars. *Les paysans* is replete with the idea that the author (Gourou) is "here and now" and that the "other" (the Vietnamese peasant) exists in another time; that the French geographer and his objects of study, by extension the French and Vietnamese, belong to different worlds, with inherently different cultural logics (Fabian, 1983). Gourou represents the delta from a lofty – elevated and detached, or "scientific" – position: a "human science" that, I am suggesting, was complicit with French colonialism. At another level, however, this critical positioning of Gourou fails to account for his attachment to the people he studied, his connection with his Vietnamese assistants, and the Vietnamese social life of his famous work. It is to this side of Gourou's engagement with Indochina that I now turn.

### **HOMO ACADEMICUS GOUROU AND HIS VIETNAMESE STUDENTS**

French and Vietnamese experts and assistants provided Gourou with a wealth of information from district and provincial offices and archives. Excellent knowledge of the French language enabled many of these Vietnamese assistants to work closely with their French "superiors", whose mastering of the Vietnamese language was comparatively lower. It was

with the help of local mandarins that Gourou managed to organise a survey to collect data from 2,000 villages. Together with a population census, this survey data served as the backbone of his 1936 *study*.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, while Gourou had a sufficient knowledge of the Vietnamese language, he still relied on Vietnamese friends, field assistants and, occasionally, an interpreter who understood local dialects. How extensive his Vietnamese network was is difficult to reconstruct from his publications – especially given that Gourou seldom cited the works of Vietnamese scholars.

But we know that Nguyen Van Khoan (1901-70) (Plate 2), who was employed at EFEO at the time Gourou lived in Hanoi, was a close collaborator. Gourou's Collège de France colleague Paul Mus (1977:19), who in the 1930s was an interim director at EFEO, called Khoan among others his and Gourou's "workmate". In 1934 Khoan was appointed as research assistant, a position that enabled him to publish in EFEO's prestigious *Bulletin*. Khoan taught Gourou Vietnamese, but proved equally valuable as a colleague in the field; his writings on local rituals display his unique knowledge of a world that was relatively inaccessible to outsiders and includes what is commonly regarded as the best description of the Vietnamese institution of the *dinh*, the communal house where villagers worship the guardian spirit and in which the worldly power of the male notables is ritualised (Nguyen Van Khoan, 1930).<sup>6</sup>

Nguyen Van Khoan was part of a wider network of Vietnamese scholars associated with EFEO. He figures in a 1937 photograph together with two Vietnamese colleagues, Ngo Tat To and Tran Van Giap (Plate 2), and some French members of EFEO, such as then director, George Coedes, Madeleine Colani, Victor Goloubew and Louis Bezacier (Clementin-Ojha & Manguin, 2001:137). And it might be him we see again on a photograph taken around 1955 when EFEO's successor, the Institute for Scientific Research of the



*Plate 2. Vietnamese personnel of the Institute for Scientific Research of the Orient (Dong Phuong bac co hoc vien), Hanoi, 1957-58. Seated are Nguyen Van Huyen (centre), Tran Van Giap and Nguyen Van Khoan (second and third from left respectively).*

*Photo courtesy of the Institute of Social Sciences library, Hanoi.*

Orient (Dong Phuong bac co hoc vien; later transformed into the Committee for Literary, Historical, and Geographical Research, ban nghien cuu Van Su Dia), presented its personnel. The recovery of voices like Khoan's helps us to identify a commonality of direction and focus among French and Vietnamese scholars during the colonial period as well as the hierarchical relations of knowledge production that during the 1930s had kept Khoan's work in a subordinate position to Gourou's.

Another of Gourou's collaborators, Vo Nguyen Giap (b. 1911), the future victorious general at the battle against the French at Dien Bien Phu (1953-54), provides us with a different angle on this French-Vietnamese liaison. Giap worked with Gourou on housing types in

central Vietnam and Gourou used his research in a pre-dissertation work (Gourou, 1936b). Gourou does not mention Giap's contribution in this work published in 1936, but perhaps this has less to do with his authorial tactic of not naming or formally acknowledging his assistants as it does with the fact that Giap was a former political detainee. Set free on probation in 1931 and sent to Hanoi, Giap studied under Gourou at the *lycée* Albert Sarraut for a *baccalauriat métropolitain complet*, the equivalent of a Bachelor degree.<sup>7</sup> Gourou remembered him as a particularly precocious and inquisitive student who took extensive notes during his classes on the history of European warfare (Bréelle, 2002:199). Giap had organised a clandestine student support network to donate money to the Indochinese Communist Party, and become

involved in student protests in Hue after the unsuccessful Yen Bai uprising, instigated by the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang). Arrested and sentenced to two years' hard labour by the provincial court of Thua Thien in late 1930, he was freed on probation in November 1931<sup>8</sup> and rehabilitated on 31 January 1935 by Justice Minister Bui Bang Doan, whereupon he enrolled at the School of Law at the University of Hanoi, graduating with degrees in law (1937) and political economics (1938).<sup>7</sup> As Marr (1981:328) describes it, after his pardon in 1935, Giap lived the life of "a law student, high school teacher, journalist, editor, and a member of the Indochinese Communist Party".

It is possible that Giap used Gourou's cover to travel to his native province Quang Binh, north of the imperial capital of Hue in Central Vietnam, during his years on probation. Giap helped Gourou to collect the data for his "supplementary thesis" in the summer of 1935, for which he used Giap's fieldnotes and drawings of houses in several provinces along the central coast. Giap's extensive knowledge of the countryside enabled him to write *Van De Dan Cay* [The Peasant Question] (1937-38) under the penname Van Dinh, with Truong Chinh (alias Qua Ninh), the main ideologue of the Communist Party (see Truong Chinh & Vo Nguyen Giap, 1974). Giap also presented a critical report of peasant conditions to Justin Godart, a French government delegate touring Indochina for the Popular Front. Both this report and his book reveal Giap's extensive knowledge of the living conditions of Vietnamese peasantry, and his indebtedness to Gourou. *The Peasant Question* would serve as a manifesto for the radical reform of the political and economic life of Vietnam's peasantry and was key to Vietnamese communist thinking and planning during the 1930s. Vietnam's struggle for independence was, after all, decided in the villages, where the recruits for Giap's "people's army" came from and where the power struggle with the French armed forces and colonial establishment was centred.

Gourou would meet Giap again at the Dalat Conference, held in 1946 to avert war between France and Vietnam, and described him as "a communist negotiator" – signalling the fact that they were no longer teacher and student. The two men met again, privately, in the early 1990s. During the four-hour interview I held with Gourou at his Brussels home in August 1994, he told me that Giap, then in Paris to seek medical treatment, had travelled incognito to Brussels to see his old professor and that they chatted about the past. Gourou and Giap belonged to different worlds and had presented radically different manifestos for the future of Indochina/Vietnam at Dalat. But again, beyond this fact of difference and the implication of implacable opposition, these two famous figures had a bond that exceeded and outlasted the Indochina War, one that was arguably important in the young Giap's political trajectory as a communist intellectual and revolutionary. Their minds met over the figure of the village – albeit for Gourou with the methodologies of French geography and professional accreditation in the background, and for Giap with Marx, Lenin and how to foment revolutionary struggle in the foreground.

In *Les paysans*, Gourou does not mention the work of Nguyen Van Huyen (1905 [1908]-1975) (Plate 2), but it seems highly unlikely that these two scholars did not meet. Huyen received his education in Hanoi, Montpellier and then Paris, where he was connected with the Société Asiatique de Paris and had taught Vietnamese at the École des langues Orientales vivantes between 1932 and 1935 (for biography, see Nguyen Phuong Ngoc, 2004:249-78). Initially devoted to Oriental philology and history, the Société Asiatique and its journal encompassed the disciplines of the humanities and the social sciences for the area stretching from the Near East to Japan. In 1934, Huyen submitted his thesis on the custom of a singing contest between boys and girls, along with a supplementary thesis on the Vietnamese stilt house, to the Sorbonne: he was, in fact, the first Vietnamese to receive

a degree from the Sorbonne and his work got wide press coverage, including his interviews on radio (e.g. *La Dépêche des Colonies*, 20 February; *Aube*, 21 February; *Paris-Midi*, 23 February; and *La République*, 24 March 1934). Marcel Mauss (1947:89) quoted his work in the influential *Manuel de Ethnographie*. On his return to Vietnam in 1935, Huyen taught history and geography at the Lycée du Protectorat, which the indigenous elite attended; in that same year, Gourou left Hanoi never to return.

Huyen's works surely influenced Gourou's ideas on how the traditional organisation of the village acted to impede agricultural progress. Unlike Gourou, Huyen acknowledged his sensitivity to the works of Vietnamese authors who were in favour of serious economic and political reforms at the village level, such as Vu Van Hien (1939) and Dao Duy Anh (for his publications see Dinh Luc & Truong Diep Bich, 1996). At the Université Indochinoise (popularly known as University of Hanoi), and the newly erected IIEH, Huyen taught courses on the social and religious history of Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> Travels to his in-laws in Lang Son brought him to study the marriage songs of the Tho minority in that province and also alerted him to the threats posed to ethnic minorities by colonial rule (Nguyen Van Huyen, 1941). His writings are best summarised by *Le culte des immortels en Annam* and *La civilisation Annamite* (Nguyen Van Huyen, 1944; 1995), major works that present a sociological overview of Vietnamese history and culture based on the available sources of research by both Vietnamese and French scholars. Heavily empiricist in orientation, he wrote extensively about village tutelary spirits, spirit cults, religious practices, festivals and local ceremonies. The village of Yen So, about 25 km from Hanoi in the province of Ha Dong, was Huyen's main site of data collection. Huyen was admitted to EFEO as a language teacher and temporary assistant at the age of 28 and became a permanent member in 1940. In the early 1940s he accepted a political position as a member of the powerless Federal

Council of Indochina, a powerless and little respected advisory body for the Governor-General composed of Vietnamese and Europeans (see Pinto, 1946:58-59;).

Huyen's scholarly reputation made him eligible for the most respectable educational post that members of the academic elite could accept: on the Conseil des Recherches Scientifiques de l'Indochine, an advisory body for the colonial government in matters of all kinds of scientific research.<sup>10</sup> In spite of this last function – and being listed in the colonial who's who, the *Notabilités de L'Indochine* in 1945/3? – the revolutionary government invited Huyen to assume overall responsibility for its scientific institutions, a position linked to the Ministry of National Education. He became the first director of the new Institute for Scientific Research of the Orient, the successor of the old EFEO, which in the 1940s was already renamed Head Institute for the Far East (*Truong Vien Dong Bac Co*) (Thompson & Adolf, 1947).<sup>11</sup> Then in July 1947, Huyen accepted the post of Minister of Education in Ho Chi Minh's government and in this capacity was responsible for the ideological struggles among students of middle, high and vocational schools in preparation for the land reform campaigns of the early 1950s (see Ninh, 2002:104, 210; for further biographical details, see Nguyen Van Huyen, 1976; 1990; 1996; Phan & Ha, 2000).

At the time Gourou worked in Hanoi, he also must have met two other assistants, both in EFEO's ethnological section (*Service ethnologique et paléo-ethnologique*), namely Nguyen Van To (1889-1947) and Tran Van Giap (1898-1973). Nguyen Van To was, in the words of David Marr (2000:12), "a conservative scholar.... acceptable to radical Vietnamese because of his integrity and patriotism". His early work on Vietnamese traditional art and the spread of *quoc ngu* (the romanised form of Vietnamese), which earned him the presidency of the influential Association for the Dissemination of *Quoc Ngu* (Hoi Truyen Ba Quoc Ngu), and his prolific writings in

French and Vietnamese journals made him a pivotal figure in the Vietnamese intellectual scene in Hanoi. The French colonial government honoured him with an Order of Knight of the Legion of Honour.<sup>12</sup> As an editor of the weekly journal *Tri Tân* (To Know the New), published between 1941 and 1945, he popularised the scholarly writings published in EFEO's *Bulletin* for a broad readership. Although the bulk of the journal's articles were criticised by the influential journalist and historian Dao Duy Anh (1904-86) as "not going back to original sources, failing to subject documents to critical analysis" (cited in Marr, 1981:280), the quality of the more scholarly contributions were judged as praiseworthy, even by modern standards (for more on the *Tri Tân* group, see Marr, 1981:179-80; Ninh, 2002:25, 35). After Independence in 1945, Nguyen Van To became Minister of Social Affairs in Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary government and, in 1946, Chairman of the First Assembly's Standing Committee; in 1947 he was killed at the hands of the French. In the obituary carried in 1997 in *Xua & Nay* (Past and Present), the leading magazine of the Association of Vietnamese Historians, To is praised "for his publications, his rigorous commentaries on the work of Vietnamese colleagues, and even the respect he is said to have engendered among senior French academics at EFEO" (cited in Marr, 2000:14).

Unlike To, Tran Van Giap is acknowledged by Gourou (1936a:127) in a reference on the history of Buddhism, but not for his ethnographic contributions. In 1915, Giap was among the last of the candidates to sit for the triennial imperial examinations for mandarins in Nam Dinh before they were abolished three years later. He subsequently went to France in 1927 to study at various prestigious institutions of linguistic studies and, in 1930 defended, two theses (see Tran Van Giap, 1932; 1938). Giap served as the scientific assistant (*assistant scientifique*) in charge of EFEO's Chinese department between 1931 and 1946. During this period he also founded the Association for the Dissemination of *Quoc*

*Ngu*, which made him a natural ally of the Vietminh, and, in 1945, joined the Communist Party and wrote an official report exposing the crimes of the French colonialists. In the maquis, he worked for the Ministry of Education, a position he left when he joined the Committee for Literary, Historical, and Geographical Research. In 1956 he was involved in the discussions about the construction of the stages in Vietnam's national history along Marxist lines, proposing that slavery covered a long period (Pelley, 2002:49). He published occasionally in the Institute of History's leading periodical *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* (Journal of Historical Research). It was also Giap who negotiated with the then director, Maurice Durand, the transfer of EFEO as well as the Museum Louis Finot (the future Museum of National History) to the Vietnamese government. In his later position as Deputy Director of the Institute for Research of the Orient, he prepared the groundwork of his extensive bibliographic compilation of Chinese and Nom texts written by Vietnamese scholars on literature, history and geography (Tran Van Giap, 1990; also see 1996, for his oeuvre). While he did not participate in the Vietnamese version of the "Hundred Flowers Campaign" of the 1950s, Giap was, in 2004, posthumously awarded the Ho Chi Minh medal for his "greater contribution to the national cause of socialist construction and safeguarding the Fatherland". Nguyen Van Huyen and Dao Duy Anh<sup>13</sup> also received this honour posthumously.

### POSTCOLONIAL VIETNAM: HYBRIDISATION OF COLONIAL SCHOLARSHIP?

While the activities of EFEO were halted in 1959 by Hanoi's revolutionary government, in recent years, the historical participation of Vietnamese scholars both there and at the short-lived IIEH has occasioned a much milder postcolonial assessment of the nature and legacies of French knowledge production than

has been the case in other formerly colonised socialist countries, where the imposition of Western or colonial science has been seen as part of that domination. In Vietnam there has been no blanket rejection of French knowledge. Indeed, it might be argued that Vietnamese scholars were in some ways complicit with France's colonial project. Until 1958, pre-1954 books on Indochina were only reluctantly reprinted with the approval of the Ministry of Culture. "Balanced" judgement of the scientific legacy of the past was not always upheld, particularly by those historians connected to the Institute of History of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. After 1959, postcolonial historical debate about the influence of French colonialism on Vietnam centred at the Institute of History and in the pages of its influential periodical, *Nghien cuu Lich su*. Many historians were divided in their opinions about the value of the archaeological, linguistic, geographical and historical studies left by the French. While one view painted the inheritance as "an Augean stable to be cleaned by the waters of a revolutionary Alpheus" (Mac Duong, cited in Evans, 1985:122), others defended the groundwork laid by French scholars and their Vietnamese collaborators. At the height of the Vietnam War, the chief Party historian Tran Huy Lieu<sup>14</sup> criticised Robequain and Gourou for misrepresenting Vietnamese history. Specifically, he argued that they had sinicised the geography of the Red River Delta, much in the same vein as what the French historians Henri Maspero and Léonard Arousseau and French Orientalists like Emile Gaspardone and Maurice Durand had done for Vietnamese history (see Boudarel, 1987:16-18).

This debate about the value of French scholarship has waxed and waned over the decades, and been guided by what Patricia Pelly (2002:43) has dubbed as a "Marxish idiom" – a hybrid Vietnamese Marxist tradition that has sought to apply some rigid theoretical and methodological principles to history and other disciplines (also see Marr 1981:313-39). Like Gourou and Robequain before them,

Vietnamese researchers lent a willing hand to governmental practices based upon a representational canon. The analysis of rural socioeconomic relations of the pre-revolutionary countryside, as Vo Nguyen Giap and Truong Chinh developed it in the 1930s, became a matrix in which class relations were to be moulded. In the first official publications about the traumatic land reform period (1953-56) the earlier descriptions of Gourou, Henry and Robequain were cast negatively as depictions of colonial life (see Tran Phuong, 1968; Ngo Vinh Long, 1973). During this period, independent research on the countryside was neither encouraged nor extensive. Yet at the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of EFEO in 1992, inaugurating its return to Hanoi, Vietnamese scholars spoke in more positive terms about the French scholars of the past, although there was no specific mention of Gourou (*90 Nam*, 1995).

As Vietnamese and foreign researchers (like myself) have returned to rural field research over the last two decades, appreciation of Gourou has come full circle. There are now a plethora of new village monographs and a renewed interest in the Vietnamese countryside and peasantry. It is this return to the field that has prompted Gourou's return to the scholarly spotlight once more. Nearly every recent work on Vietnamese rural society that I know of quotes – often chapter and verse – from the few human geographers who collected data more than 70 years ago. The focus on the village community, which in Gourou's hands bore some essentialist traits, has become more oriented towards issues of migration and mobility, and more multidisciplinary projects stress the importance of the study of the relationship between humans and their natural environment (Papin & Tessier, 2002). The tropicity and Orientalism of these earlier works is not contested. Vietnamese geographers working today seem not to bother about their discipline's colonial heritage. Vietnam's leading geographer, Le Ba Thao (1923-2001), has used Gourou's work as a seemingly unproblematic source of knowledge. "Man

has step by step turned the Red River Delta into a big granary”, and “has lived harmoniously with nature and has known how to put it to avail”, he writes, in the English translation of his *Vietnam: pays et régions géographiques* (Le Ba Thao, 1997:324). For Thao, village society represents a timeless social organism: “The basic unit in the social organization in the Red River Delta is always the villages and the communes. This is a tight organization, it is more or less autonomous (the king’s rule is behind the village’s custom), the villagers are bound by clannish relations, ritual relations, communal relations” (Le Ba Thao, 1997:327). Here Gourou’s echo is unmistakable, and this image of the traditional village is endlessly perpetuated by many contemporary Vietnamese historians and geographers (e.g. Nguyen Khac Vien, 1993; Phan Huy Le *et al.*, 1993).

With the recent translation of Gourou’s (2003) *magnum opus* a larger Vietnamese audience will finally become acquainted with the details of his work. While reviews of this text have **not yet** appeared, the Association of Vietnamese Historians’ magazine *Xua & Nay* had recently hailed French researchers like Gourou as “sincere of scientific purpose and engaged in path-breaking work of significance to later generations of scholars in independent Vietnam” (cited in Marr, 2000:6). No longer are scholars like Gourou viewed through strictly nationalist-communist lenses as enemy imperialists. Because the Red River Delta is accorded a privileged place in the annals of Vietnamese history, its main investigator, Pierre Gourou, has become the “pioneer of Vietnamese rural studies... whose work has not lost its originality and actuality” (Dao The Tuan, 2004:23-24).

With respect to Gourou and his work on Indochina, the term “tropicality” can be seen as a technical one that captures his geographical interest in the specificity of tropical climate, topography and vegetation – as a term that is perhaps less sinister than others in this Special Issue may make out. To

be sure, Gourou was part of a dominant Western discourse that “orientalised” – or perhaps even “tropicalised” – his objects of study. But as some (Bréelle, 2002:243; Bowd & Clayton, 2005) have argued, Gourou also represented the Far East and the tropical world with humanistic, poetic and idealistic conceptions and images. Since overpopulation was the key problem facing the Red River Delta, the colonial project was doomed to fail or at least it would have a limited impact upon development. In this regard Gourou differed profoundly from his contemporary Robequain, who adapted Vidalian geography to the French colonial project. Gourou’s tropicality was linked to the power of a discursive intellectual formation that sustained a regime of truth during and after the French colonial period. More than anyone, Gourou was aware of the topicality of his subject: the complex human geography of the tropics and the challenges it posed to both Western and “tropical” peoples. He had a keen sense of the otherness of the tropical world, yet, in my reading of much of his work at least, he did not define such otherness as completely alien to the northern temperate zone (Arnold, 1996:6). Nor did he deny the Vietnamese peasants their own history or geography. In his 1936 study *Le paysans*, Gourou was ultimately concerned with the dilemmas posed by the particular geography of the Tonkin Delta – with human geography in its purest sense.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> With respect to the *montagnard* population, the Guernut Commission seemed to have had more success (see Saleminck, 1999:262-63).

<sup>2</sup> In 1933, Andrée Viollis’ famous notes on the French use of torture in Indochina in the aftermath of the Nghe-Tinh uprisings (1930-31) were published by the Catholic magazine *l’Esprit*.

<sup>3</sup> Nguyen Van Vinh (1882-1936) (aka Tan Nam Tu) was an enthusiastic populariser of the national script *quoc ngu*, who in 1912, together with the French publisher F.H. Schneider, founded *Dong Duong Tap Chi* (*Journal de l’Indochine*), a *quoc ngu* newspaper that encouraged modernisation along French lines. As a member of the Consultative Assembly for North

Vietnam, Vinh picked on the theme of the reorganisation of village administration, for which his poor peasant background afforded him a considerable insider's knowledge of village life in northern Vietnam (Marr, 1981:116-17, 151-52; Jamieson, 1993:65-69, 71-80). After Independence in 1945, Vinh was denounced as a "francophile assimilationist", but nowadays his translations of French classics and his zeal to promote Vietnamese journalism (in *quoc ngu*) are lauded (see also Goscha, 2001:319-46).

<sup>4</sup> Gourou's rigorous defence of fieldwork, however, did not go unnoticed by his colleagues and admirers, which partly explains why the University of Nijmegen honoured him with a doctorate *honoris causa* in 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Except [Apart from?] *Le Travail* [significance?], there were other journals like *Nam Phong* (Southern Winds/Ethos Journal) and *L'Annam Nouveau* (New Annam) that regularly published stories with a social background. For more on publishing activities in the colonial setting see Marr (1981:44-53).

<sup>6</sup> Nguyen Van Khoan's research focused on the ceremonial aspects of the *dinh*, its associated buildings and religious objects, though not discussing the social significance of this institution, which over the years led to an involution of village rituals, including the costly custom of banqueting.

<sup>7</sup> Gouvernement General, dossier 53.447, 'Report by French Secret Police on political prisoner Vo Nguyen Giap, 1938', CAOM.

<sup>8</sup> Résident Supérieur d'Annam, dossier 898, 'Letter from Resident Supérieur to Governor General regarding political prisoners in central Vietnam, 1938', CAOM.

<sup>9</sup> Other topics of courses and conferences focused on tattoos, the caste-like differentiation among village elites, funerary customs, name-giving practices of the royal family, indigenous law and Taoist cults venerating immortal beings.

<sup>10</sup> Members of the Council included Leopold-Michel Cadière, Pierre Coedes and Louis Malleret; the Vietnamese members were Hoang Xuan Han, later the Minister of Education in the Tran Trong Kim government, Phan Quynh, later the Minister of Interior in the same government, Ngo Dinh Nhu, brother of later President Ngo Dinh Diem, and Vu Van Hien, a lawyer.

<sup>11</sup> Today EFEO has reinstalled an office under the name Vien Vien Dong Bac Co Phap tai Hanoi (The French School of Far Eastern Studies in Hanoi).

<sup>12</sup> Together with Nguyen Van Huyen and Tran Van Giap, Nguyen Van To also figures in the 1945/3?

*Notabilités de l'Indochine*. The *Tri Tan* group was characterised by Truong Chinh as composed of "feudalist intellectuals", who, as Ninh (2002:35) puts it, "were inclined to nationalization but because they looked to the past they were hostile to science and the masses".

<sup>13</sup> Order 16-LCT/HDNN, Chairman of the State Council, November 2000. Dao Duy Anh was initially involved in the the 1950s "Hundred Flowers Campaign" – which in Vietnam was officially known as the *Nhan-van Giai-pham* affair, after two literary journals of the time – but had issued a statement of self-criticism in the *People's Daily* of 21 May 1958 (see Ninh, 2002:159).

<sup>14</sup> Marr (2000) remembers Tran Huy Lieu's courageous personal position in the Hundred Flowers Campaign. In France, Yves Lacoste (1976) had pointed to the abuse of Gourou's thesis for the war effort in Vietnam, but later apologised for this "blunder and injustice" (Gourou *et al.* 1984:51).

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