

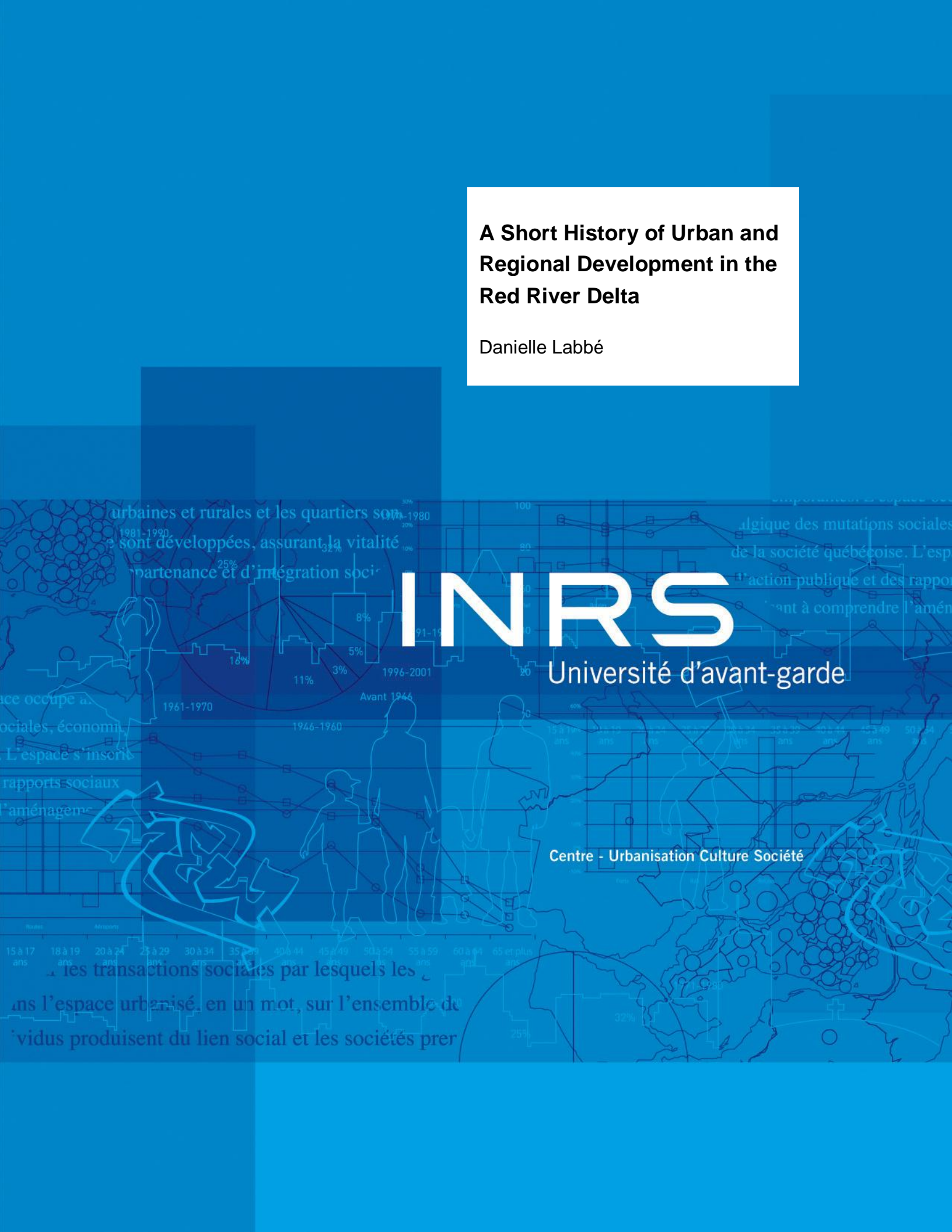
# A Short History of Urban and Regional Development in the Red River Delta

Danielle Labbé

# INRS

Université d'avant-garde

Centre - Urbanisation Culture Société





# **A Short History of Urban and Regional Development in the Red River Delta**

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March 2011

Available at :

Institut national de la recherche scientifique  
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Montréal (Quebec) H2X 1E3

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[www.uqs.inrs.ca](http://www.uqs.inrs.ca)

The publication of this research note was possible thanks to the financial support of:

VRM.ca

Laboratoire de recherche  
VESPA  
Ville et ESPAcés politiques

|mēso|  
métropolisation et société

ISBN 978-2-89575-242-4

Legal deposit : - Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 2011

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## PROJECT FII OF THE SSHRC



Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Canada

Note 1:	Danielle Labbé. 2010. <i>Facing the urban transition in Hanoi: recent urban planning issues and initiatives</i> , 42 pages.
Note 2:	Thị-Thanh-Hiền Phạm. 2011. <i>Débats sur l'urbanisation au Viêt Nam : Synthèse de la revue 'Người Đô thị'</i> , 2007 et 2008, 54 pages et annexes.
Note 3:	Thị-Thanh-Hiền Phạm. 2011. <i>The urbanization of Viêt Nam under debate: a review of 'Người Đô thị' magazine, 2007 &amp; 2008</i> , 52 pages and annex.
Note 4:	Danielle Labbé. 2011. <i>A short history of urban and regional development in the Red River Delta</i> , 53 pages.
Note 5:	Julie-Anne Boudreau et Jean-Pierre Collin (avec la collaboration de Marie-Ève Lafortune). 2011. <i>L'urbanisation au quotidien : enquête sur les transformations des conditions de vie dans deux communautés de la périphérie urbaine de Hanoi</i> .
Note 6:	Julie-Anne Boudreau & Jean-Pierre Collin (with the collaboration of Marie-Ève Lafortune). 2011. <i>Everyday urbanisation: A study of the transformation of living conditions in two periurban communities of Hanoi</i> .



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## Foreword

The urban transition is a central phenomenon in Việt Nam, affecting all aspects of social, cultural, economic and political life. For the next 25 years, Vietnamese cities are expected to grow at an annual rate of 6%, with the result that the proportion of urban population will increase from 30 to 50% (MoC, 2009). Such a rapid transition inevitably produces significant changes in everyday life.

A number of researchers have focused their attention on understanding the urban transition. Fieldwork is mainly carried out on the peripheral areas of large cities where a dense mesh of villages are facing a process of accelerated *in situ* urbanization, both spontaneous in nature and as an outcome of the central government's policies on land use conversions. As a result of this planning approach, the right to use land for agricultural purposes is revoked by the government, concessions are granted to private developers or "privatized"<sup>1</sup> state corporations, and villagers are forced to abandon their agricultural livelihood to enter retraining programs and join the service industry in either the formal or informal sectors. Plagued to conflicts, this process has given rise to bitter struggles over land compensation, to tensions between villagers and the newly arrived urban population, and to conflicts between different jurisdictions whether local, provincial or national. In addition to these conspicuous shifts, major changes stemming from the economic reforms introduced in the country during the 1980s have contributed significantly to redefine the national economic structure, everyday life patterns of consumption, and work and street-level behaviours.

This research brief is the result of a project conducted between 2007 and 2010 on An Khánh and Tân Triều, two periurban communes recently integrated in the administrative space of Hanoi ("Urban Transition in Việt Nam: Issues and Prospects"). The following questions were raised:

1. What are the strategies used by village inhabitants to address the social, cultural and economic shifts spurred on by urbanization, in relation to the following issues:
  - a. The labour market;
  - b. Patterns of consumption, in particular regarding the purchase of food;
  - c. The management of family conditions (gender relations, mobility opportunities, etc.);

---

<sup>1</sup> Following the introduction of the *Đổi mới* reforms in the 1980s, the state has progressively privatized its public enterprises by registering them as a joint-stock company under the Private Enterprise Act, while retaining control of a majority of their shares.

- d. Conflict arbitration and relationships between newcomers and host communities
2. Has the perception of residents towards the urban transition changed in any way according to the way in which the central state framed urbanization?
3. Have these shifts led to the creation of civil society organisations? To what extent do they take part in planning decisions?
4. How are populations and governments addressing environmental problems arising from urbanization?

In close collaboration with our colleagues from the Sustainable Development Institute for the North (SDIN) of the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), this research deals with the wider context of the ongoing discussion on urbanization in Việt Nam. Its importance can be seen through the urban development process for the 2050 Masterplan and the numerous debates appearing in daily newspapers.

The objective of the present analysis is to understand the evolution of urbanization and regional development in Việt Nam's Red River Delta region focusing on the period from the late pre-colonial era up to the beginning of the socio-economic reforms of the *Đổi mới*. This review seeks to identify and characterize the major societal, economic and urban and rural spatial transformations which occurred in the delta. These changes are examined in relation to territorial land features, historical events, successive political regimes and their associated urban and regional planning ideologies.

The purpose of the paper is to illustrate the scope of urban and regional transformations that took place in the Red River Delta (RRD) for the period from approximately 1890 to 1980. During these tumultuous historical times, the region witnessed major changes. The most obvious is the tremendous population growth, a process of urbanization that was accompanied by the emergence of a much sharper urban-rural divide. The paper also examines how, on the one hand, the region benefited from infrastructural, agricultural, and industrial modernization projects, while on the other hand, the socialist regime established a new governance structure. Moreover, four elements of historical continuity are highlighted: (i) the constraints posed by the unique environmental conditions of the delta; (ii) the density of the delta's population and settlement system and their associated constraints; (iii) the persistence of a small-scale economy; and (iv) the tension that has existed between the Vietnamese central state and its ambitions and the strong resistance by local governments.

This research was made possible thanks to funding provided by the Graduate Scholarships Program and the International Opportunities Fund of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, another grant from SSHRC through the project *The Challenges of the Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia* (ChATSEA), the ministère des Relations internationales du Québec and the INRS Urbanisation, Culture et Société research centre. We wish to acknowledge Stefan Reyburn for proofreading the English version and Cindy Royas for layout.

Julie-Anne Boudreau and Jean-Pierre Collin



# Avant-Propos

La transition urbaine est un phénomène majeur au Viêt Nam, touchant tous les aspects de la vie sociale, culturelle, économique et politique. Pour les prochaines 25 années, on projette une croissance des villes vietnamiennes de 6% par année, ce qui propulsera le taux d'urbanisation du pays de 30 à 50% (MoC, 2009). Il va sans dire qu'une transition si rapide produit des bouleversements importants de la vie quotidienne.

Plusieurs chercheurs se penchent sur la transition urbaine. Beaucoup de travaux explorent plus particulièrement les périphéries des grandes villes dans lesquelles un maillage dense de villages s'urbanise *in situ*, tant spontanément que suite à une conversion de l'usage des sols planifiée par le gouvernement central. Sur le terrain, cette planification se traduit par une révocation des terres agricoles par le gouvernement, leur développement par des promoteurs privés ou par les sociétés d'État « privatisées »<sup>2</sup> et la reconversion forcée pour les villageois d'un mode de subsistance agricole à l'intégration du secteur tertiaire officiel ou non. Il s'agit d'un processus fort conflictuel avec des frictions importantes autour des compensations pour les terres, des relations entre les villageois et les nouveaux habitants des zones urbanisées, et des relations entre les autorités locales, provinciales et centrales. À ces transformations palpables sur le terrain s'ajoutent les bouleversements majeurs résultant de l'ouverture économique du pays dans les années 1980, ce qui reconfigure autant la structure économique nationale que les comportements quotidiens de consommation, de travail, d'échanges dans les rues.

Cette note de recherche est issue d'un projet mené entre 2007 et 2010 dans deux communes périurbaines de Hà Nội, An Khánh et Tân Triều (« Urban Transition in Viêt Nam : Issues and Prospects »). Nous nous posons les questions suivantes :

1. Quelles stratégies développent les habitants de ces villages pour répondre aux transformations sociales, culturelles et économiques apportées par l'urbanisation, en regard :
  - a. du marché de la main-d'oeuvre;
  - b. des comportements de consommation –notamment au chapitre de l'alimentation;
  - c. des conditions de vie familiale (rapports de genre, mobilité, etc.);
  - d. des conflits de médiation et des relations entre les nouveaux venus et les communautés d'accueil ?

---

<sup>2</sup> Suite aux réformes du *Đổi mới* qui ont débuté dans les années 1980, l'État a graduellement privatisé ses entreprises en les enregistrant comme compagnie par action sous la Loi des entreprises privées mais en gardant souvent le contrôle sur la majorité des parts.

2. Est-ce que l'évolution de l'attitude étatique face à l'urbanisation a influencé la perception des habitants face à la transition urbaine?
3. Y-a-t-il eu de nouvelles organisations de la société civile créées dans la foulée de ces transformations? Celle-ci ont-elle un poids dans les décisions de planification?
4. Comment les populations et les autorités font-ils face aux problèmes environnementaux engendrés par l'urbanisation?

Menée conjointement avec nos collègues de l'Institut pour le développement durable du nord (Institute for the sustainable development of the North, ISDN) de l'Académie des sciences sociales du Viêt Nam (Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, VASS), cette recherche s'inscrit donc dans un débat animé au Viêt Nam sur l'urbanisation, comme en témoignent le processus d'élaboration du nouveau plan d'urbanisation à l'horizon 2050 et les débats quotidiens dans les journaux.

L'analyse qui suit a comme objectif de comprendre l'évolution de l'urbanisation et du développement régional dans la région du delta du Fleuve Rouge au Viêt Nam, de la fin de la période colonial jusqu'au début des réformes socio-économiques sites du *Đôì mới*. Cette synthèse historique cherche à identifier et caractériser les grandes transformations sociales, économiques, urbaines et rurales ayant impactées cet espace. Ces changements sont examinés en relation avec les caractéristiques de l'occupation du territoire, les événements historiques, la succession de régimes politiques et leurs répercussions sur les idéologies de la planification urbaine et régionale.

Le document cherche à rendre compte et illustrer la gamme des transformations qui ont eu lieu dans la région du Delta du Fleuve Rouge, approximativement des années 1890 aux années 1980. Au cours de cette période historique tumultueuse, cette région a connue des changements majeurs. Le plus manifeste est celui d'une croissance démographique explosive –un processus d'urbanisation qui s'est accompagné de l'émergence d'une distanciation plus marquée de l'urbain et du rural. Le document propose ensuite un examen des bénéfices retirés par la région des projets de modernisation des infrastructures, de l'agriculture et de l'activité industrielle, d'une part, tandis que le régime socialiste s'est traduit par la mise en place d'une nouvelle structure de gouvernance, d'autre part. Finalement, quatre éléments forts de continuité historique sont mis en évidence : (i) les contraintes posées par les conditions environnementales exceptionnelles du delta; (ii) la densité démographique élevée, la structure d'occupation du territoire et leurs contraintes mutuelles; (iii) la persistance d'une économie de petite échelle; et (iv) les tensions qui ont existé entre l'État vietnamien et ses ambitions, d'une part, les fortes résistances déployées par les gouvernements locaux, d'autre part.

La réalisation de ce travail a été rendu possible grâce à l'appui financier du Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada –par le biais du programme de Bourses d'études supérieures et du Fond d'initiatives internationales, du projet intitulé *The Challenges of the Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia* (ChATSEA) –financé également par le CRSH (programme des Grands travaux de recherche concertée – GTRC), du ministère des Relations internationales du Québec et du centre Urbanisation Culture Société de l'INRS. Nous tenons aussi à remercier Stefan Reyburn qui a assuré la révision du texte et Cindy Rojas pour la mise en page du document.

Julie-Anne Boudreau et Jean-Pierre Collin



# Introduction

This working paper discusses the evolution of urbanization and regional development in Việt Nam's Red River Delta region focusing on the period from the late pre-colonial era up to the beginning of the socio-economic reforms of the *Đổi mới*. In writing this short historical overview, my primary goal is to try to identify and characterize the major societal, economic and urban and rural spatial transformations which occurred in the delta during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These changes are examined in relation to territorial land features, historical events, successive political regimes and their associated urban and regional planning ideologies. Whenever information is available, the discussion considers endogenous processes that drive the development of urban centres and the countryside as well as interactions between these processes and state-led urban policies, plans and strategies.

This review allows me however to go one step further. The literature suggests that, even in the rapidly evolving Asian transitional societies, urban and regional changes occur in ways that are informed by, and consistent with, historical continuity; these changes therefore cannot be properly understood outside of their long-term historical context. The second goal of this paper is therefore to consider post-reform urban changes in northern Vietnam along the lines of *ruptures* and *continuities* in the historical development of the Red River Delta region. Readers wishing to further expand on this overview and learn more about the most recent urban changes taking place in the region of Hà Nội since the *Đổi mới* reforms can download a working paper entitled *Facing the urban transition in Hanoi: recent urban planning issues and initiatives* (2009) available at: [www.ucs.inrs.ca/pdf/HanoiUrbanization.pdf](http://www.ucs.inrs.ca/pdf/HanoiUrbanization.pdf)

The discussion is presented in three main sections, structured chronologically, together with a conclusion. Section one covers the pre-colonial period (before 1896). I first discuss how geomorphological characteristics influenced local patterns of settlements. This is followed by an outline of the Red River Delta's urban and rural populations, its administrative system and the economic activities at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, just before colonization. The colonial period (1897-1945) is covered in the second section. I describe how the delta was divided by the French colonizers according to urban and rural jurisdictions. This system, along with specific urban and rural interests, led to major transformations in the delta. Section three reviews urban and regional changes from the beginning of the Vietnamese struggle for independence up to the first reforms of the socialist socio-economic system (1946-1979). I consider the societal, economic and spatial impacts of the First and Second Indochina Wars as well as the influence of the rise to power of a communist regime on the delta. The issue of historical continuity,

a point to which I return to in the conclusion, is re-examined by highlighting four elements of continuity that have persisted throughout this period in the patterns of social space in the Red River Delta.

## 1. URBAN CENTRES AND THE COUNTRYSIDE DURING THE LATE PRE-COLONIAL ERA

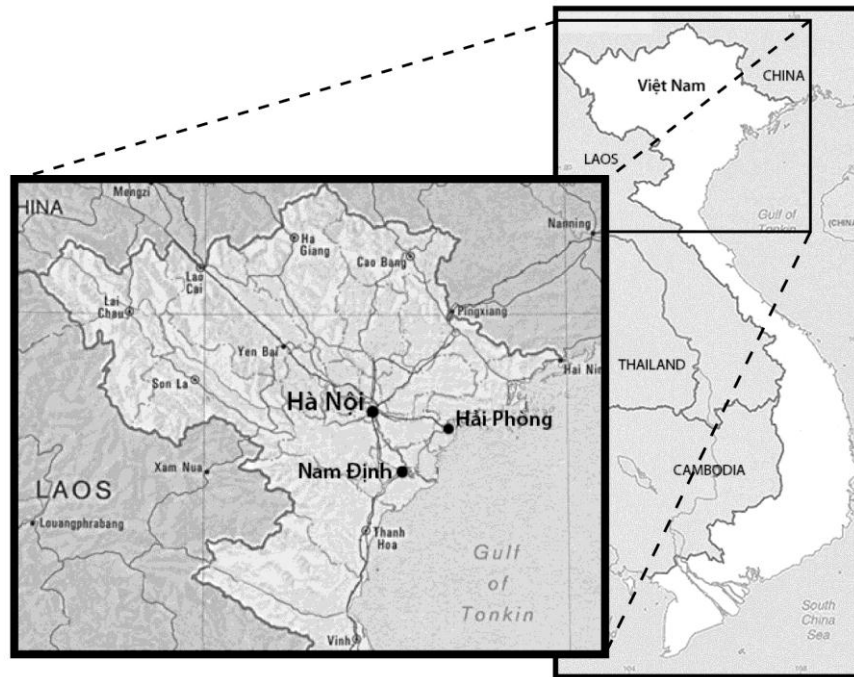
The Red River Delta (thereafter RRD) region's history is long and tumultuous. Human occupation of the region can be traced back 10,000 years to Mesolithic and Neolithic cultures with settled agriculture as early as 9,000 years ago (Beresford 1988: 3). These cultures formed through migratory waves from the interior of the continent, islands of the South China Sea, and other insular regions of Southeast Asia (Papin 2001: 16-9). Recent archaeological findings indicate that two cultural centres evolved in parallel in the mountains surrounding the Red River valley until they were united, around 700 BC, into what Vietnamese mythology and national history identify as Vietnamese (*Đông Sơn*) culture (Taylor 1983; Nguyen Van Huyen 1995).

For approximately four centuries, this population remained concentrated at the apex of the delta. Less subject to floods, this zone allowed the irrigation of paddy fields by taking advantage of tides and currents. The southern part of the delta was regularly inundated and so remained sparsely populated by groups of hunter-fishers. The agricultural exploitation of this part of the delta went hand-in-hand with the development of more sophisticated wet-rice agricultural techniques during the third century BC. Following this development, the lowlands were progressively settled by a population of wet-rice farmers. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the entire territory of the delta was under cultivation (Taylor 1983: chapter 1).

In the meantime, the delta's population had endured more than a millennium of Chinese invasion and occupation,<sup>3</sup> seen the rise and fall of three imperial dynasties, and faced innumerable natural catastrophes and internal struggles for power. Out of this turbulent history, the RRD region inherited a unique combination of societal, economic, and spatial characteristics. The resulting settlement structures, socio-political organization, and economic system formed the backbone of urban and regional development.

---

<sup>3</sup> Việt Nam was under Chinese rule from 111 BC up to 938 AD.



**Figure 1 : The Red River Delta in Việt Nam**

Source : author

## 1.1 Facts are Stubborn Things

The Northern Vietnamese delta is a triangular region, covering an area of 15,000 square kilometres and bounded by the Tonkin Gulf on the southeast and by steep rises of forest highlands on the northern and south-western edges (see figure 1). The region is dominated by one of the most violent and unpredictable rivers in Asia: the Red River (*Sông Hồng*). The delta is extremely flood-prone because of its small catchment basin, erratic but heavy rainfall, and flat relief to the point that the plain would not be useable for rice cultivation under natural river conditions (Rambo 1973: 71-2).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The cultivation of wet-rice under conditions of natural flooding is only possible where there is a stable river regime involving a single, gradually rising flood (e.g. Mekong Delta, Chao Praya Delta), otherwise rice is drowned under sudden increases in water depth. The Red River flood regime is neither predictably unimodal nor gradualistic. If the natural regime was unmodified by human intervention, a half to a third of the delta's annual crops would be lost to flooding (Gourou 1984; Rambo 1973: 73).

---

## 1.2 Living between Land and Water

In his landmark social geography of the RRD, *Les paysans du Delta tonkinois* (1965), French geographer Pierre Gourou asserts that the formation of the region's settlement system depends on the complex environmental circumstances within which it evolved. One of his central theses is that the settlement of the region was shaped early in its development by the need to ensure access to the floodplains where wet-rice could be produced as well as to dry lands where dwellings could be protected from natural disasters. Gourou argues that by attempting to come to terms with these two somewhat conflicting goals, wet-rice growing communities profoundly transformed the landscape of the RRD.

Gourou builds on the observation that, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a majority of villages in the delta were located along what he refers to as “natural ridges”, which are the result of the long process of sediment deposition that shaped the RRD during the Tertiary Period.<sup>5</sup> A completely flat plain did not arise from this sedimentation process. While to the casual observer the delta appears flat, its landform varies in fact from sea-level to a few meters above sea-level from point to point on its surface. Indeed, alluvia transported by the sea formed a set of ridges parallel to the coast (what Gourou calls “*cordons littoraux*”). Successive floods of the Red River further accumulated alluvia along its arm, thus forming a second set of ridges perpendicular to the coast (what he calls “*bourrelets fluviaux*”).

Gourou shows how the land ridges provided early settlers with a natural transportation system. He adds that these “road-dikes” were critical factors in the expansion of an agrarian economy in the deltaic lowlands and in the efficient movement of people and goods in and out of the region. It follows that the natural topography underpins the region's settlement pattern that evolved into a specific system which, the author argues, may be described by a typology of rural settlements defined by site location: “river-ridge villages” correspond to settlements built on littoral ridges; “hill-side villages” correspond to those built on small mounds, etc (ibid: chapter IV). Common to all types is the location of dwellings on higher ground, above the floodwaters, and the resulting compact settlements. This spatial pattern is not only determined by the limited availability of elevated terrain in the delta, but also by lowland rice cultivation and by the fact that compact villages are easier to defend against external aggressions (see figure 2 and 3).

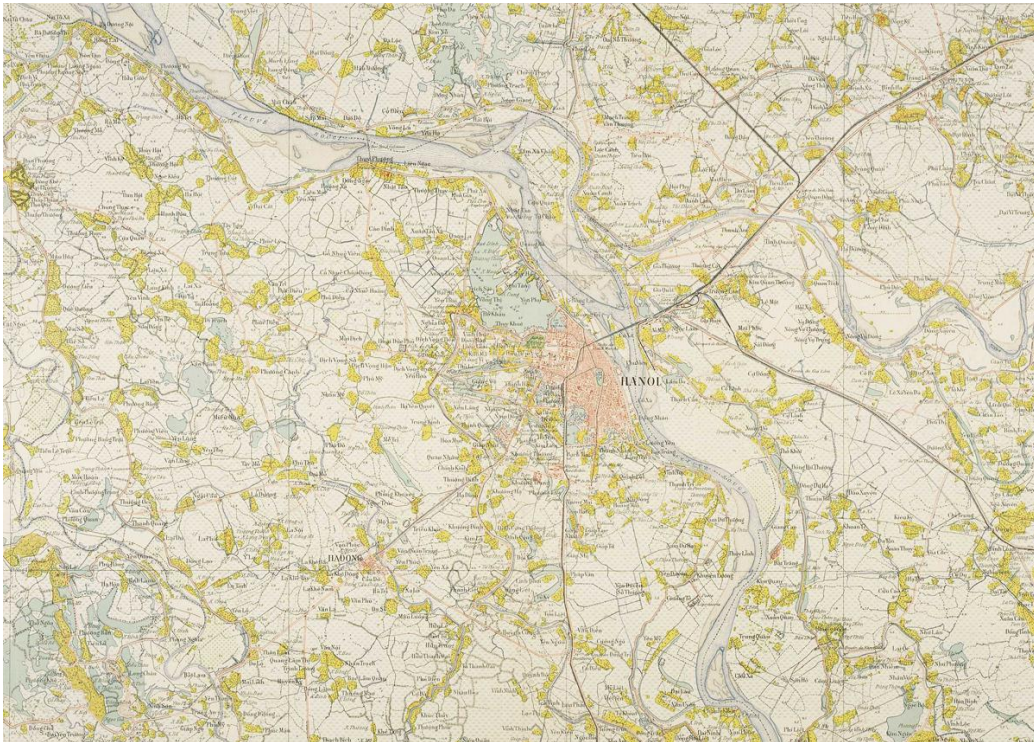
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<sup>5</sup> The region, which was originally part of the China Sea Gulf, was progressively filled by large amounts of ferruginous alluvia transported by the river and the sea.



**Figure 2 : 1936 aerial photograph showing “river-ridge” village settlements**

Source : Fonds Louis-Georges Pineau



**Figure 3 : Excerpt from a 1935 map of the region of Hà Nội showing villages' distribution patterns (in yellow)**

Source : Unknown

---

### 1.3 Of Dikes and States

The extensive settlement of the delta called for a larger system of dikes parallel to the main rivers that could only be built and managed by a regional state authority. In Isoart's words (1961 quoted in Rambo 1973: 74), a "coherent politics of water" based upon "a solid social organization allowing the mobilization of all energies" was required before settlement could expand to any extent. A common thesis is that a northern Vietnamese pre-colonial imperial state arose, evolved, and was legitimated through the need to coordinate the hydraulic works in the whole of the delta to combat drought and flood (Rambo 1973; Papin 2001).

The chronology of the construction of this water-control system is still not clear. It is believed that prior to Chinese occupation, the planning and construction of dikes was carried out at the village level. Once again, Gourou suggests that topography played a central role in the formation of the delta's agrarian landscape. Dikes were most likely initially built by individual villages established at the apex of the delta. These communities would then complement, raise, and reinforce natural ridges to protect natural polders where wet-rice could be cultivated. This was accompanied by the construction of smaller dikes dividing natural polders into smaller paddy-fields, as well as the digging of canals and storage ponds for mechanical irrigation of fields (Dao The Tuan and Molle 2000).

It is generally assumed that Chinese occupiers introduced larger-scale water management principles to Việt Nam. Taylor (1983) makes the case that the Chinese brought with them water-control techniques and associated models of state governance developed in the context of the Yangtze River basin. Indeed, both the development of a bureaucratic government and the construction of the first major dikes occurred during the Lý Dynasty period (1009 to 1225 AD), when the Đại Việt kingdom was under Chinese control. Independent Vietnamese dynasties which took control of the delta's territory after the end of the Chinese occupation inherited and made use of the water management principles put in place by the Lý emperors. The Trần (1225-1400), and Lê (1428-1788) dynasties did in fact maintain and extend the delta's pre-existing water-control system (Dao The Tuan and Molle 2000).

The emergence of a bureaucratic state created a new factor in the social environment of the peasantry, and state policies with regard to flood control left a major imprint on the layout of the villages. Each settlement was given the mandate by the central authorities to guarantee the maintenance of the dikes across its territory. As noted by Rambo (1973), in view of the inadequate communication system of the time and the limited span of direct control that the central government could exercise in pre-colonial Việt

Nam, this delegation of responsibility to the villages for day-to-day maintenance of the dikes as well as for the provision of a self-mobilizing labour force in the advent of emergencies, was seen as reasonable, and perhaps as the only possible solution to the problem.

Early European chronicles indicate that by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Red River and its tributaries were contained by massive river dikes complemented by extensive systems of seawalls, storage ponds, drainage ditches and irrigation canals. From a technical standpoint, the dikes constructed by the Vietnamese Empire had design deficiencies. However, the sheer magnitude of the system represented an impressive achievement. By the time of the French conquest, the “dike system ... was almost as extensive as the one which now exists. In the basin of the Red River alone, it was almost 1,000 kilometres long and protected about 600,000 hectares of arable land. The total volume of earthworks thus patiently built up through the ages may be estimated at 22 million cubic meters” (Dao Trong Kim and Tran Ngoc Hau 1952: 42-3).

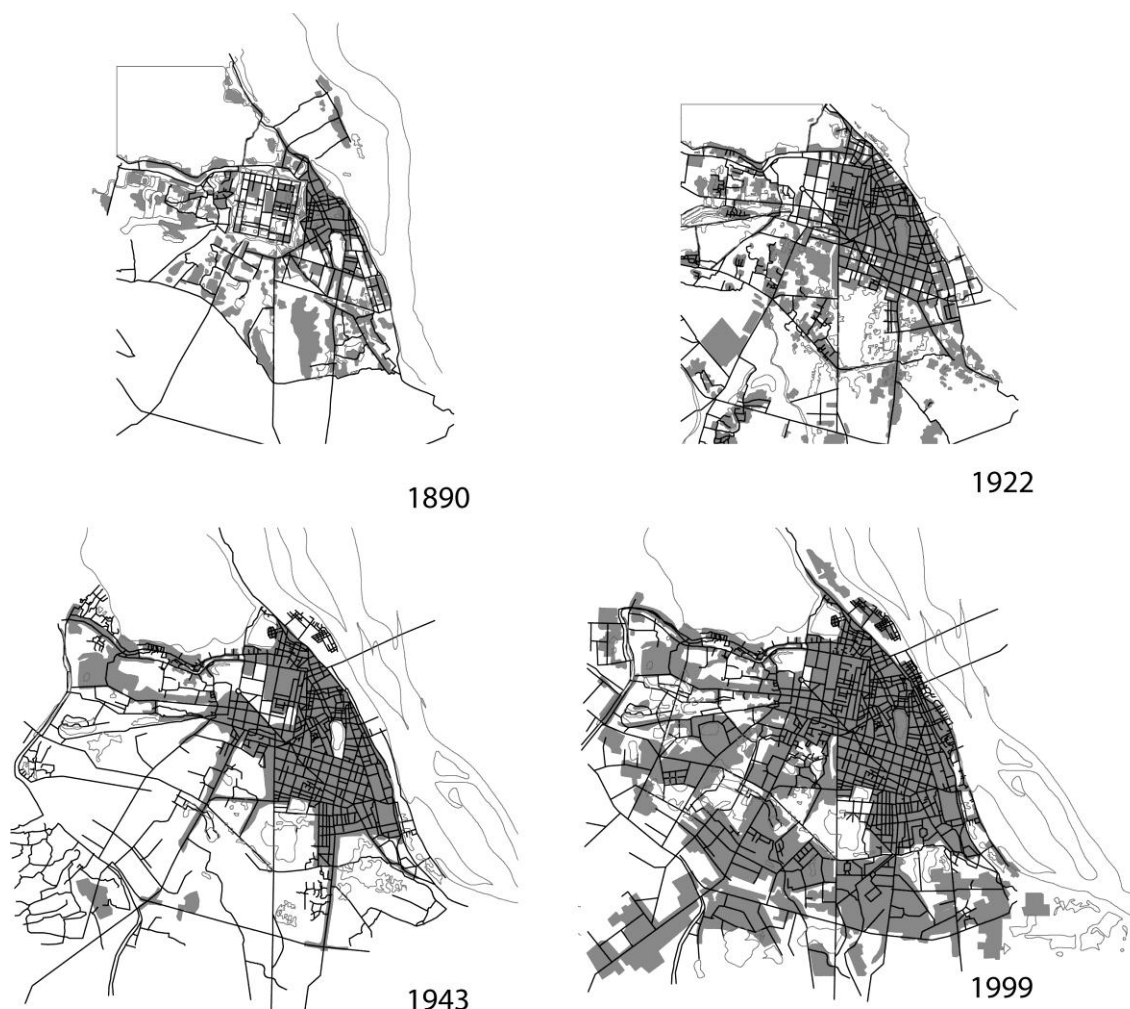
#### **1.4 Hà Nội: Building a City on Water**

Gourou’s thesis, stressing the role of geomorphological and hydrological factors in the formation of the delta’s settlement system, has recently been applied to explain the morphogenesis of Hà Nội. At a smaller scale, Decoster *et al.* (1995) argue that the formation of the city faced territorial realities similar to those of the countryside. There too, low topography, regular floods, and the heavy rains of the monsoon favoured the transformation of natural ridges into roads and dikes.

Nonetheless, the city could not simply develop along the higher land of natural ridges, but called for a more compact form. This required the creation of habitable land out of the lower lands found between natural ridges. Decoster *et al.* suggest that two main strategies were used in the construction of the city and have persisted to the present day. The first strategy is to completely remodel the natural lowlands, by raising, draining and turning them into a dry buildable platform. This approach calls for major infrastructural work and a centralized planning organization that can only be carried out by the state. The authors show how building and renovations of Hà Nội’s imperial citadel, the colonial residential and administrative quarters, and the realisation of collective housing schemes during the communist era all relied on this first strategy.

Alongside large-scale urban development projects, a multitude of building initiatives carried out by households also contributed to the urbanization process. The most common approach adopted by inhabitants is to raise a platform on the soggy land and build an individual structure on it. This involves erecting brick walls at the edge of a

plot to create a sealed compartment. This compartment can then be drained and planted with a bamboo-pile foundation used to support a small platform on which the building stands. This construction technique is clearly visible in the land use pattern of Hà Nội. For example, the old quarter of Hà Nội dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century was conceived in this manner. This technique is still in use today in “spontaneous” urban extensions occurring along existing roads on the edge of the city (see figure 4).



**Figure 4 : Evolution of Hà Nội's built fabric and road system**

Source : Reproduced from Labbé, D. and Doan The Trung (2001)

## 1.5 The Pre-colonial Urban-Rural Dynamic

Little information exists on the delta's population prior to French colonization besides general comments made by early Western visitors and travellers. Accurate reconstruction of the RRD's demographic history is indeed constrained by lack of

reliable data (Gourou 1965: 172-9).<sup>6</sup> What can be confirmed on the basis of available records is that the North has continually supported a very large population, which has steadily increased over several hundreds of years.

The first reliable estimates of the delta's population were made by French scholars who studied the region during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Brenier (1914), the delta's population in 1885 reached nine million people. Gourou (1965: 179) later revised that number, bringing it down to 6.2 million. On the small territory of the delta, this estimate gives a very high average human density of 430 inhabitants per square kilometre. As noted by Rambo (1973: 169), this is among the highest rural densities reported in the world at that time, equalling or surpassing Java (315 persons per km<sup>2</sup>) or the Ganges Delta of Bengal (413 persons per km<sup>2</sup>).<sup>7</sup>

Beyond these general demographic figures, the human settlement system of the RRD region during the pre-colonial era challenges the very notions of city and countryside. Gourou (1965) argues that in the RRD neither population densities nor agglomeration sizes were indicative of urbanity:

The Tonkin Delta, with its 430 inhabitants per square kilometre, can absolutely not be compared with the most densely populated regions of Europe swarming with people. The high density European countries are all industrialized, with great urban development [...] In the Tonkin, even in the most populated areas, areas exceeding 1,000 inhabitants per square kilometre, the landscape is rural, peasants are peasants. This population, extraordinarily dense, is entirely rural. (ibid: 10, my translation)

Even more puzzling for Gourou was the fact that the region comprised agglomerations of 10,000 inhabitants which, he believed, were in all respects rural, and settlements of barely 500 people displaying what he thought of as an urban character. In an attempt to escape an unworkable dichotomy between the rural and the urban, the author proposes a classification based on function, social structure, and physical form:

[A] village consists of peasants who occasionally may practice certain sedentary or nomadic industries, but remain essentially agriculturalists; a village consists only of people born in this very locality; tradesmen may be numerous, but they practice outside of the village that never looks to expand its commercial base; such villages most often lack convenient access; a village in the Tonkin is a built-up area composed for the most part of thatched houses surrounded by a garden. What we call city, in the Delta of the Tonkin, can be home to only five hundred inhabitants, but they are all

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, the population censuses conducted by the dynastic states only counted adult males. These figures are further disputed because of the general tendency by village authorities to under-report their population as a way to evade taxation.

<sup>7</sup> This very dense population was grouped into more than 7,000 rural settlements sheltering approximately 500 to 1,000 people each (Nguyen Van Huyen 1995: 180).

craftsmen or tradesmen [...] this city consists almost exclusively of individuals born elsewhere and settled there more or less temporarily [...] the city is a cluster of tightly-knit houses, made of bricks and covered by tiled-roofs. (ibid: 9-10, my translation)

While Gourou is not specifically interested in the RRD's urban life, he does not hesitate to characterize Hà Nội as a city. This built-up area, he argues, does not pose the kind of definitional problems found in the countryside: its large population, political and administrative functions, and market definitely make it a city. Yet, drawing on the notion of Western cities used during this period and applying it directly to Hà Nội while ignoring the peculiar co-presence and interplay between the rural and urban spheres must be called into question. To clarify this issue, it is helpful to examine more closely the political and economic changes which took place in Hà Nội under the Nguyễn dynasty and how they shaped the city's socio-spatial, political, and economic development.

According to Vietnamese legend, Hà Nội was founded in the year 1010 when the king Lý Thái Tổ transferred the capital of the Đại Việt from Hoa Lư to Đại La and named the new site of his imperial power Thăng Long ("Rising Dragon") (Tran Quoc Vuong and Nguyen Vinh Long 1977). For much of its subsequent history, Thăng Long's physical and functional development loosely followed the model of Southern Chinese garrison cities. For this reason, the city was surrounded by a wall up to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The enclosed space was divided into two parts: the imperial city (*hoàng thành*), which sheltered the political power and the commoners' city (*kinh thành*), which comprised markets aimed at supplying the political nucleus (Papin 2001: 67).

This garrison city urban structure eroded progressively throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Over the course of two centuries, Hà Nội transformed from an imperial centre sustained by peripheral markets to a thriving trading place downgraded to a provincial-level administration. With the relocation of the capital to Huế, Hà Nội witnessed the departure of the imperial court, its magistrate and administrative staff. Yet, the civil part of the city had, since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, progressively grown and developed into a bustling market town (*kê chợ*).

The intensity of the social and economic activities in *Kê Chợ* caught the attention of the Europeans who visited Hà Nội during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries:

The city of Ca-Cho [*Kẻ Chợ*] is the metropolis of Tonqueen and may, for its capaciousness, be compared with many cities in Asia, and superior to most for populousness, especially on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of their new moon, being their market days, or grand bazaar; when the people from the adjacent villages flock thither with their trade, in such numbers as is almost incredible; several of the streets, though broad and spacious, are then so crowded that one finds enough to do if he can sometimes advance through the multitude a hundred paces in half an hour. (Baron 1811: 659)

Under the Nguyễn dynasty, production and trade combined in *Kẻ Chợ*. Hà Nội's pre-colonial market-town might have seemed, to the Western eye, an urban society. In spite of this, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Kẻ Chợ* challenges much of our conventional understanding of what constitutes an urban place. Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, groups of rural migrants had settled in Hà Nội according to their place of origin. Each group inhabited a different street segment. As in rural villages, the physical limits of each community were clearly marked by a guarded entrance gate that was locked at night. These "villages in the city" were not only spatially separated from each other but had only limited social, economic, or political interactions with each other (Papin 1997).

Labour, goods, and capital did not circulate locally from one urban village to the next, but moved instead between urban communities and their villages of origin. Both the workforce and materials for sale were supplied from the villages. The urban craftsmen and tradesmen living in *Kẻ Chợ* were mostly peasants who came to the city during the low agricultural season to produce and sell specialized handicrafts. Few stayed in Hà Nội for extended periods of time. Handicraft production and trade activities were considered of little virtue by Confucian standards and their ultimate aim was to support peasants' agrarian life back home.

Hence, most people returned to their ancestral villages and the money they earned in the city was used to purchase land and build religious monuments and altars used to worship ancestors (Nguyen Thua Hy 2002: 18). The religious and political lives of urban villages also remained independent and closely linked to their rural origins. Each community had its own communal house (*đình*) where local affairs were managed. Each also had its own temple or pagoda where tutelary deities worshiped in the village found a second home. In short, the population of rural migrants coming to *Kẻ Chợ* during the pre-colonial era never created the kind of autonomous and integrated socio-spatial environment which we, in the West, understand geographically and sociologically as a city. As noted by Woodside (1988), under the Nguyễn dynasty, Hà Nội was essentially a provincial administrative centre complemented by an assemblage of detached rural communities.

## 1.6 The State-Village Division of Ruling Labour

The village was the basic unit of pre-colonial Vietnamese society and is often said to have been an independent and autonomous political entity, a state within a state. Many authors believe that this autonomy created a recurring tension between imperial administrators and village authorities. This view is closely related to a long and unsettled debate about the degree of political autonomy of the village in relation to the imperial state's capacity to rule society (Nguyen The Anh 2003; Marr 2004; Papin 1997).

Research on rural Việt Nam generally describes the village as an inward-looking place traditionally oriented towards the past, while its political autonomy, economic self-sufficiency, and closed corporate organization formed a stable, self-contained microcosm (McAlister and Mus 1970; Nguyen Van Huyen 1995; Phan Huy Lê 1993). In accordance with the Vietnamese proverb that “each village strikes its own drum and worships its own deities” (*trống làng nào làng ấy đánh, thánh làng nào làng ấy thờ*) the pre-colonial Vietnamese village was to a certain extent, a unique, distinct, compact, and isolated community. Each village had its own specific charter (*hương ước*), customs and legal code (*tục lệ*), its own manners and mores. The communal house (*dinh*) served both as the administrative centre and the place of worship for the village's tutelary deity.

These self-sufficient villages had little need for contact with either the central government or other communities and were administered directly by so-called Councils of Notables (*Hội đồng hào* –or *kỳ mục*). These village councils enjoyed considerable prestige and power: they handled relations with the state, collected taxes, and conducted rites of worship and harvest festivals central to the folk religion. One of their major tasks was to govern the redistribution of the village's communal lands (*công điền*). The RRD region's pre-colonial land tenure system was characterized by a mix of private and public land. Communal land represented approximately one quarter of the delta's agrarian territory at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Papin 1997). Public lands were administered, controlled, and periodically redistributed by the village council to eligible villagers. The village council was also the final adjudicator of local conflicts between and within families (Ory 1894).

While stressing village autonomy, most of the literature on pre-colonial Vietnamese politics tends to overstate the pre-colonial state's inability to enforce its will. Although a famous Vietnamese saying holds that “the customs of the village have precedence over the laws of the king” (*phép vua thua lệ làng*), the primacy of the state is exemplified in classical statements such as “there is no land under heaven's vault that does not belong to the king” (*phổ thiên chi hạ, mạc phi vương thổ*) and “on this earth man is but a king's vassal” (*suất thổ, chi nhân mạc phi vương thân*). Imperial policies were typically

enforced through a system of mandarinal supervision and occasional repression (McAlister and Mus 1970; Nguyen The Anh 2003; Papin 1997). More importantly, the imperial court gained compliance through incentives and rewards to increase villager involvement in political affairs (Popkin 1979: 109). The case of water-control system maintenance discussed earlier, and that of trade regulation, discussed below, are some of the most telling instances of this ruling strategy.

## 1.7 The Case of Trade and Commerce

For most of the pre-colonial period, the RRD region's economy was predominantly agricultural. The majority of households supplemented their incomes by producing handicraft during slack periods of the agricultural cycle. Small-scale trading took place year-round along the main dikes linking villages. With the exception of Hà Nội, the delta had no major stores or markets and large-scale trading was dominated by Chinese immigrants (Woodside 1988). Apart from the Chinese and a small number of artisans, trade and handicraft production were secondary economic activities (DiGregorio 2001; Gourou 1965).

Beginning in 1626, Portuguese, Dutch and English merchants arrived in Việt Nam to trade European goods for silk and spices. However, Vietnamese markets at the time were unable to meet this demand, so these expeditions ceased by the end of the century (Logan 2000). The export trade in the delta under the Nguyễn dynasty consisted only of goods from the highlands and rice from the south (Nguyen Thua Hy 2002). So limited was trade that one 19<sup>th</sup> century traveller found it “difficult to conceive that a population so extensive can exist with trade on such a small scale” (quoted in Woodside 1988: 30).

The most significant constraint to the development of trade was the countless barriers and taxes which the Vietnamese court imposed on both external and internal exchanges. At the national scale, during an era spanning ten centuries up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the vast majority of Vietnamese emperors enforced a “closed-door policy” (*bế quan toả cảng*). From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onward, the monarchy viewed foreign merchants, particularly those from Western countries, as possible spies as well as sources of heterodox ideas, and thus restricted their trading opportunities (Malarney 1998).

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century the defence of Thăng Long, which once formed a strong impediment to trade with foreigners, began to soften. During this period, rival aristocratic families (the Trịnh Lord in the North and Nguyễn in the South) vied for power. Foreign ships took advantage of that rivalry to open Việt Nam and Thăng Long to trade, exchanging military equipment for local goods (Nguyen Thua Hy 2002: 261). Trading in pre-colonial Việt Nam nonetheless remained difficult for foreigners:

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Foreign merchants were frequently turned away and always subject to scrutiny of every item on board. The best items were seized by rapacious mandarins in the name of the king. When the English protested about such treatment in 1672, they were told that “the King was the King of Tongking before we came and would be after we were gone, and that his country had no need of any foreign thing.” (Reid 1993: 62-3)

When access was granted, foreign merchants had to cope with stifling tariffs and bureaucratic procedures, the forced sale of their goods to Vietnamese authorities at below-market prices, and confinement to trading centres where their activities could be regulated and limited (Malarney 1998: 270). Foreigners were forbidden to buy supplies directly in local markets at local prices. Moreover, the purchase of certain basic Vietnamese commodities (e.g. rice, silk, and metals used for imperial coinage) or precious items used by the king was forbidden. With the number of ports of entry restricted to a bare minimum, the state monopoly of foreign trade and overseas trading rendered international trade nearly impossible (Nguyen Thua Hy 2002: 261, 293).

Domestic trade also suffered from regressive state policies and actions. At the basic level, poor infrastructure, especially the lack of a year-round transportation system, constrained the development of exchanges throughout the delta (Malarney 1998). Perhaps more significant were the excessive restrictions imposed on trade in goods (Nguyễn Văn Huyền 1994). Phan Huy Lê (1993: 138) reports that, under the Nguyễn dynasty, rice trading between provinces required the permission of officials in all of the regions involved, and transit taxes had to be paid to every bailiwick. For instance, the movement of rice from the province of Nam Định to Nghệ An (a distance of approximately 150 kilometres) required payment of nine separate taxes. Such constraints on commercial activities might have been designed to restrict peasants to agricultural activities and to discourage the emergence of local power bases that thrived on supra-village economic growth (Nguyen Thua Hy 2002: 259-60; Popkin 1979: 113).

Handicraft trade too was severely limited by the imperial state:

Taxes were heavier on artisans than farmers, discouraging the formation and growth of guilds. Artisans or individuals who casually produced handicrafts also sometimes abandoned production altogether because of excessive taxes or levies on their products. Government interference in production could take an even more extreme form: in 1481, local officials attempted to expel all traders from the city of Thang Long; in 1779, the government prohibited trade between the highlands and the lowlands; and in 1834, Emperor Minh Mang issued a decree closing all markets in Vietnam. (Malarney 1998: 270)

The monarchy effectively impeded the development of handicraft production by conscripting talented artisans to work under gruelling conditions for minimum wages on government work projects. “When the government found a clever craftsman,” writes Nguyen Thua Hy (2002: 26), “it conscripted him and forced him to work hard for a period of time without pay for the king or a mandarin” (see also Woodside 1988: 31). The state’s negative impact on the development of trade and commerce is highlighted by the sharp rise of these activities in Hà Nội once the Royal Court apparatus moved to Huế (Papin 2001: chapter 9).

The so-called “triumph of the merchants,” in Hà Nội, did not happen overnight. In fact, at least since the late Lê dynasty (1428-1788), the Vietnamese mandarin state established a reified Confucian vision of the proper social order by attaching greater value to agriculture and defining it as a virtuous pursuit and by stigmatizing trade and commerce (Reid 1993: 62). Treating social and occupational classes as if they were one and the same, the traditional Vietnamese theory of class stated that society consists of a four-tiered prestige-stigma hierarchy (*tu dan*). At the apex were the educated scholar-officials (*sỹ*); below them were the farmers (*nông*); lower yet were the artisans and handicraft specialists (*công*); and at the bottom were the traders (*thương*) (Woodside 1988: 31). “If agriculture, which Confucian literati associated with the idea of the “root” was the focal point, commerce was nothing but an activity linked to the “branch,” despicable, demeaning, and which needed to be pruned, from time to time, to ensure society’s stability” (Papin 2001: 164, my translation).

As noted by Woodside (1988: 31), these theories only partially matched the RRD region’s social reality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During pre-colonial times, few inhabitants of the RRD depended strictly on handicraftsmanship and trade to make a living. Most of the population engaged in these activities as a complement to agriculture (see Gourou 1965: part 3). In practice, the distinction between the three bottom rungs of the Confucian social ladder was thus often blurred. Yet, the overall prestige-stigma structure remained salient at the moral level, a view well captured by the popular adage: “respect agriculture, disdain commerce” (*trọng nông, ức thương*).

The case of trade and commercial activities during the pre-colonial era reveals the indirect yet ubiquitous hand of the state in the RRD. Without intervening explicitly in the local affairs of villages, the imperial state could nevertheless govern major areas of society. The omnipotent state was able to discourage the agrarian population of the delta from engaging in commercial activities not only through the use of restrictive economic policies, taxes, and barriers but also through the diffusion of moral principles about the “proper way of life.”

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The shortcomings of trade in the delta are sometimes associated to the absence of a real system of cities. Thus Gourou (1965: 10) writes: “The causes of the poor development of cities are diverse. The most evident are economic: the population of the Delta does not produce much and does not consume much. This reduced activity, the dominant practice of a closed economy, could hardly favour the growth of cities.” The same argument is found in Anthony Reid’s (1993) history of Southeast Asia’s trade boom between 1450 and 1680. He concludes that during this period, commercial activities marked a decisive shift in power to trade-based cities and sustained the growth of cosmopolitan, commercial cities in Southeast Asian regions located along trade routes. This boom excluded Việt Nam, which “presented a face by turns hostile or disinterested towards the rising current of external trade” (ibid: 62-3). How the RRD region’s society would have organized socio-spatially if handicraftsmanship, internal trade, and international commerce had been less tightly restricted remains in the realm of speculation. Nonetheless, the hypothesis that the restrictions indirectly prevented the formation of cities in the RRD remains perhaps the most plausible.



## 2. URBAN AND REGIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS UNDER THE FRENCH

France's colonial venture in Việt Nam began in 1859. French colonization in Indochina was spurred on by both commercial and religious interests (Papin 2001). The conquest began in 1867 in the Mekong Delta region (*Nam Bô*, which the French called Cochinchina), and progressed to central Việt Nam (*Trung Bô*, Annam to the French) and the RRD region (*Bac Bô* or Tonkin). By 1897 and despite fierce local resistance throughout the campaign, the Vietnamese imperial court was forced to accept protectorate status in both the central and northern regions (Beresford 1988: 8).

The French entered, dominated, and transformed the RRD region via its urban centres. Following the signing of the "Philastre Convention" in 1874, two concessions were made to the French on the Tonkin territory: a small site on the southern edge of Hà Nội and the port of Hải Phòng (Robequain 1939: 131). There, the French could impose their institutions, laws, codes, and rules. Outside of these two urban concessions, the Huế Court's mandarins administered the rural territories under the authority of a French *résident* (Popkin 1979: 134). The impact of the French presence on the RRD region's urban and regional development was a function of this jurisdictional division: Hà Nội (and to a lesser extent the few other cities of the delta) developed spatially, economically, and culturally under the modernizing influence of the French while the countryside evolved at arm's length from the centres of Western power.

### 2.1 French Colonial Hà Nội: 'La Folie des Grandeurs'

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, France imposed itself upon a war-torn city abandoned by the mandarinat and by its population in 1870 while the civil war raged. The French *Résident* in charge of Tonkin at that time writes: "This city, once inhabited by more than eighty thousand souls, is now deserted; Hà Nội displays the saddening aspect of a dead city" (quoted in Papin 2001: 225, my translation). This small provincial town, declared capital of Indochina in 1902, yet soon experienced a rapid expansion.

From the beginning, the French had great plans for Hà Nội. André Masson (1929) labels the first phase of French settlement from 1873 to 1888 the "*période héroïque*". This period was marked by bold steps to tame the city, subdue the indigenous population, and overcome the most urgent of Hà Nội's environmental problems. Improving the city's security and access was one of the colonial government's top priorities. To this end, the internal gates that separated "urban villages" were removed. The merchant city's roads were also widened and straightened to facilitate access by troops and horse-drawn carriages. Fearing epidemics, authorities developed solutions to improve urban

sanitation. They cleaned the banks of urban lakes, diverted household waste into a sewage system, installed footpaths and gutters, and filled swamps in and around the city (Logan 2000: 72-3).

The French also extended the city's infrastructure to accommodate the colony's civil and administrative functions. "A handful of men," writes Papin, "took over a city, with a strong determination to build over it –and not beside it, as the British did in New Delhi, for instance– a great colonial city" (Papin 2001: 211, my translation). What the French found in Hà Nội consisted of a small commercial sector occupied by approximately a hundred "urban villages." The Vietnamese city was dominated by a handful of powerful elites and ruled by established customs. This pre-existing city could not be developed into the grand colonial capital envisioned by the French and so, they chose to establish their quarters at the periphery of the old commercial core (Papin 2001: 229-30).

Many writers have described the architectural achievements of the French in great detail (Logan 2000; Papin 2001; Pédelahore 1983, 1992; Wright 1991). For most of the colonial period, Hà Nội was in the throes of a building and renovation boom. The construction of the first French quarter began in earnest in 1888. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a second sector was developed on the ruins of the citadel. South and west of the merchant quarter, French engineers laid out "a generous grid pattern of streets 20-30 metres wide, and large housing blocks designed to give the French settlers the healthy suburban lifestyle then coming into vogue in affluent Western cities" (Logan 2000: 92). There, "the senior bureaucrats, bank representatives, opium farm agents, and rich colonial settlers enjoyed not only spacious villas but also horse-drawn and later motorised carriages and teams of servants" (ibid: 92).

The French built an impressive number of public buildings to shelter regional and municipal administrations. They further built numerous schools, a university, hospitals, a cathedral, and the famous opera house (see figure 5). The colonizers felt that the subjugation of the Asian peninsula required the physical projection of French power with modern and enlightening buildings in the capital (Wright 1991: chapter 9).



**Figure 5 : Hanoi's opera house circa 1935**

Source: Reproduced in NXBTT (2006), p.39

## 2.2 The Indigenous City

Histories of French urban interventions in Hà Nội have long ignored the transformations that took place in the indigenous city. During this period, Hà Nội was, (at least in demographic terms), populated largely by the indigenous Vietnamese.<sup>8</sup> Up to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this indigenous population was divided into two sectors. More than half the population lived in the old merchant quarter (see figure 6). The rest lived in the peri-urban zone: a belt of villages on the outskirts of the city whose rural character was progressively altered through economic, political, and social influences from the urban core.

<sup>8</sup> In 1900, 80,000 people lived in the intra-muros city. Approximately 1,000 were French, 2,000 Chinese and a few hundred were Indian and Japanese. In 1940, the proportion of Vietnamese was even higher with some 160,000 people living in the city, plus at least 50,000 in the peri-urban zone. Of this number only 4,000 were French, and 6,000 were overseas Asians (Papin 2001: chapter 13).



**Figure 6 : The « rue des Changeurs » in the old merchant quarter, circa 1925**

Source : Reproduced in Nguyen Quoc Thong (2001), p.20.

The French impact on these two indigenous parts of the city was less obvious than the intensive construction in European districts. Nonetheless, French urban policies fostered social segregation along socio-economic class lines which altered the city's socio-spatial structure. One such policy was the ban on “precarious” buildings, viz. wooden and thatched-roofed houses referred to in French as *cases* and *paillotes*. When the French arrived in Hà Nội, approximately 80 percent of buildings were of this type. The colonists viewed these buildings as unhygienic and unattractive; they issued a series of decrees progressively forbidding them within an ever enlarging perimeter. By 1906, *cases* and *paillotes* were banned almost everywhere in the inner city. However, these buildings were permitted on the city's outskirts. As noted by Papin (2001), “city officials could hardly do otherwise and did not wish to, because that is where the migrant peasants settled, an indispensable contribution to an urban population with a negative natural growth rate” (ibid: 248, my translation).

In the peri-urban zone, indigenous urban households, driven out of the European areas, tended to live in close proximity to semi-rural communities and with the recently arrived peasants seeking work. In 1921, the livelihood of 40 percent of the households living around Hà Nội depended upon economic activities associated with the primary sector (agriculture, fishing, market gardening, silk worm raising, salt extraction, etc.) (Papin 2001: chapter 13). The rest of the population lived on handicraft production or practiced emerging urban professions (e.g. mechanic, house painter, decorator).

Artisans began selling on the city's outskirts near to where they lived, while others commuted to sell various consumer commodities directly to consumers. In many respects, the rural areas surrounding the city slowly acquired a distinct urban character. These zones were differentiated from village life not only by their populations and urban economic activities, but also by socio-political changes that altered traditional relations.

### 2.3 Municipal Council versus Street Chiefs

The management of Hà Nội during the colonial period was characterized by the presence of two complementary but different sets of governing bodies. At the city scale, the two official ruling institutions of the *Résident-Maire* and the Municipal Council were created by statute in 1888 and remained in force in the Municipality of Hà Nội's until the end of the First Indochina War (1954). The Municipality of Hà Nội was not the centre of everyday political life in the indigenous city, which revolved instead around the network of so-called "street chiefs" (*phó trưởng*). This network allowed the French municipal authority to penetrate urban Vietnamese society and impose its rule in a city where the mandarinal elite had been eliminated.

In charge of myriad tasks which the mayor's office could not have performed alone, the locally elected street chief stood in sharp contrast to the municipal council members:

It adjudicated disputes between Vietnamese, kept a watch over the Chinese, maintained public order, certified acts, controlled land conversions, updated the tax rolls, verified trading licenses, and ensured street hygiene. The conduct and management of affairs gave immense power to the street chief acting within the few stretches of road which constituted his territory [...] He offered a multitude of small services to an illiterate population ignorant of the subtle municipal administrative procedures, performing work for remuneration, but the people were used to "spices" [...] This small corruption was convenient for the municipal authority and the citizens who stayed afar from the Service of Contributions, Treasury, and all these complications. (Papin 2001: 267, my translation)

For the people of Hà Nội, this day-to-day political life created a civic consciousness, or at least, an awareness of the role played by the urban citizen at the neighbourhood level. Throughout the colonial years, the different socio-spatial parts of Hà Nội developed different perspectives on urban governance. In the poorer and less literate periphery, villagers and newly arrived suburbanites demanded that the street representative speak on their behalf to higher authorities. On the contrary, in the wealthier inner-city, Vietnamese merchants and Vietnamese professionals educated in French schools resented this form of corruption and felt they could deal directly with the municipal authority and not through the agency of a street chief. By the end of the colonial period,

Hà Nội was composed of at least two distinct indigenous jurisdictions, namely the peri-urban villages with its precariously-built dwellings, and the inner city with its more solidly-built houses. Yet both parts reflect the emergence of a civil society that felt a yearning to participate in the political life of their city (ibid: chapter 8 and 13).

## **2.4 Out of Hà Nội: The Other Urban Phenomenon**

During the colonial period, the urbanization of the RRD remained largely concentrated in and around Hà Nội. Outside of the Indochinese capital, the urban population accounted for less than five percent of the total population (Popkin 1979: 135). However, the foundation of two other urban centres due to colonial rule sheds light on another dimension of the colonial urban phenomenon. These are the industrial city of Nam Định, at the southern edge of the delta, and the commercial seaport of Hải Phòng, 100 kilometres east of Hà Nội on the coast of the Tonkin Gulf (see map at figure 1).

During the pre-colonial era, Nam Định was, after Hà Nội, the most important urban centre of the delta. Three functions were carried out at the time by the city: it housed the provincial mandarin, an examination centre for aspiring mandarins, and a large commercial sector. After the conquest, the urban agglomeration remained the site of regional power, with a flourishing port and commercial trade. This led to the formation of a small European district, a small Chinese community and a relatively large Vietnamese area (Fourniau 1991: 172-3). Nam Định is notable as one of the few industrial centres of the RRD to have emerged out of the colonial era. Miller (1947) describes the industrial activities of the city: “The cotton factory alone had, in 1930, about 5,500 workers [...] Next to it was a silk factory of 1,300 workers, a distillery of 250 workers, etc [...] That’s without considering the smaller scale businesses owned by the Chinese and the businesses owned by the Vietnamese” (Miller 1947: 397).

In contrast to Nam Định, Hải Phòng offers an example of a city created almost *ex-nihilo* by the colonization. When the French first arrived in what would become Tonkin’s most important commercial port, Hải Phòng was “nothing other than unsanitary swamplands and marshlands in the middle of which the rare patches of dry land were covered with miserable *canha* [houses]” (Henri Philippe d’Orléans quoted in Fourniau 1991: 175, my translation). Following the conquest of Tonkin, Hải Phòng was nevertheless designated as the primary seaport of central and northern Việt Nam. Thereafter, the colonial government invested massive amounts of money to build a functional port and city (Robequain 1939: 134). By 1930, commentators describe Hải Phòng as a great and modern place with its port, industries, theatre house, racecourse, and European quarter (Fourniau 1991: 177-8).

Like many other European colonial cities across Southeast Asia, Nam Định and Hải Phòng thrived economically by keeping their Vietnamese workers in miserable conditions. Wages in the French and Chinese industries were kept low through a continual influx of landless villagers. In the delta's commercial port and industrial cities, labour consisted primarily of destitute rural peasants who lived in squalid slums. More than 100,000 Vietnamese, for instance, lived on the outskirts of Hải Phòng, "in the marshlands and paddy fields, in minuscule huts built of adobe, straw, and bamboo" (Robequain 1930: 126, my translation), forming a "working-class area that has become a heap of misery" (Fourniau 1991: 173, my translation).

## **2.5 Rural Exploitation and Infrastructure**

Contrary to the early hopes of the French colonizers, the RRD offered limited opportunities for resource extraction. The plan to export agricultural surpluses from the region was among the first to be abandoned (Rambo 1973). The region's arable land had long been entirely under cultivation and could barely meet the local population's nutritional needs (Thompson 1937: 123). Moreover, the delta's dike system prevented the use of alluvial groundwater for fertilization. During the colonial era, the delta's soil was extremely poor and the yields per hectare were the lowest of any major rice-producing country (Vickerman 1986: 28). Diversification or intensification of agricultural production would require considerable investment, especially in fertilizers, which the French were not equipped (or interested) to manufacture.

During the first decade of colonization, the French also abandoned plans to develop coal mining. A mining rush started around 1890 but lasted only until about 1905. Prospecting was believed to be impossible because of lack of capital and the unpacified elements of the country. Access to mines was also a problem. In the words of a contemporary observer, at the time of the conquest the delta's road network consisted of "in fact only small trails or mere paths along the bunds of rice-fields, which for the most part were impassable during the rainy season. The tops of the dikes formed the only large and well maintained arteries" (Pasquier 1929: 226, my translation). If this system was well suited to the subsistence economy and limited trade of the delta's pre-colonial society, it greatly reduced both personal mobility and the exchange of bulky goods and constituted a major barrier to the kind of industrial resource extraction envisaged by the French.

Despite the constant demands of mining prospectors, no significant initiatives were undertaken to improve the rural transportation system. The reluctance of the colonial administration to approve major capital investments can be explained by their growing doubts in the profitability of such projects and by the limited financial support from the

*Métropole* (i.e. Paris). Not very long into the colonial period, development was hampered by the restriction that any public works undertaken by the Indochinese government had to be financed by income generated within the colony. Initiatives in infrastructure development, especially transportation networks, were also limited by the RRD's overpopulation and settlement patterns:

On the Red River Delta the villages already existed, requiring that roads be laid out according to the pre-existing distribution of rural population rather than according to rational economic criteria... Given the nature of the settlement pattern in the North, tying existing villages into a modern road network was beyond the financial capabilities of the colonial regime. (Rambo 1973: 70)

The only significant projects dating from the colonial era in the delta's countryside were the construction of the Indochinese Railroad and general improvements to the dike system. The first project, launched in 1881 by the first General Governor of Indochina, Paul Doumer (1897-1902), consisted of a 77 kilometre railway linking the Mekong delta to the upper Tonkin. Built at great expense, the French railroad program was an attempt to meet military and international commercial needs. As a result, it bore little relation to the peasant trading system and carried little freight or passenger traffic (Del Testa 1999). Thompson (1937) suggests that, even if the railway's route had been better designed, it would still have remained underused due to the delta's traditional lack of trade: "there was little to no transport. Natives in most parts of the colony raised only enough for their own wants and did not exchange the surplus, if any, because adjacent districts produced the same thing" (ibid: 206).

A more significant development in the RRD region involved the pre-existing dike system. When the French took over Tonkin, the delta was subject to regular floods and droughts. Although the colonial government strengthened the weakest dikes in the years following the conquest, breaks still occurred, on average, every three years. The two possible solutions to this problem were to either improve the existing dikes or build a new system (which would allow natural fertilization using alluvial groundwater). The former option was chosen and French engineers corrected the major dike's path, widening it in many areas. As well, an artificial irrigation system that came from the island of Java was put into operation. Although very expensive, the dike improvement program proved to be very effective. Between 1927 and the construction of the Hòa Bình Dam in 1988, only one breach occurred during the record floods of 1945 (Jamieson 1993).

## 2.6 Socio-Economic Impact of French Policies on the Countryside

Outside of the cities, most of Tonkin's pre-colonial political institutions were maintained. Under the French, governance in the countryside was exercised by local Councils of Notables supervised by the mandarin administrative apparatus, which in turn reported to French provincial administrators from the *Résidence Supérieure*. The French not only preserved the pre-colonial political system, but followed essentially the same tax policies that had prevailed under the Vietnamese empire. The colony's main income was generated by regressive land and head taxes carried over from pre-colonial times, supplemented with customs duties and some new taxes introduced by the French administration. This taxation policy never succeeded in making the colonial government financially self-sufficient, but it did have a devastating effect on the traditional peasant economy.

The exact combination of causes and events that led to the pauperization of the countryside during the colonial period is the subject of much debate in the literature. Beresford (1988: 9) suggests that colonial taxes were simply too high for the poor rural population of the delta. The tax burden, the economic historian argues, forced many peasants to borrow at usurious rates, sell their land, or engage in sharecropping activities to meet tax obligations. McAlister and Mus (1969: chapter 4), argue instead that it was not so much the harsh taxes which increased the burden for the peasant, but the requirement that these taxes be paid with cash by a population that had hardly any access to money. A third explanation relates to transformations in the Northern Vietnamese village's traditional political economy. French administrative practices, especially the loosening of control of land ownership and redistribution, destroyed the pre-colonial sense of collective obligation and mutual support and led to various forms of administrative abuse in villages (see Popkin 1979 for an extensive discussion). This would have contributed to the transformation of the delta's landholding structure and emergence of a class of impoverished sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and landless peasants (Vickerman 1986: 30)

In spite of increasing poverty, there was no mass exodus because most peasants could not afford to migrate. With labour migrancy from Tonkin to the central and southern parts of the country blocked by the French, there was no place to go. Peasants therefore attempted to cope as best they could in their native villages and with their declining situation through seasonal, short-term migration, sometimes by labouring in the surrounding mines and mills, or trying to find work mainly in villages in other parts of

Tonkin or in the delta's urban centres. Small groups of men and women moving through the delta became an increasingly common sight, and by the 1930s, at least 30 percent of the population in some older, denser provinces, migrated seasonally (Gourou 1965: 214-23). This new mobility had important side effects, including a widening of peasants' knowledge of the world outside the village boundaries (Beresford 1988: 10).

### 3. THE RED RIVER DELTA REGION UNDER RED FLAGS

Although Vietnamese resistance to French rule never subsided during the colonial period, it was disorganized and sporadic in the beginning. When an indigenous independence movement surfaced, it was immediately thwarted by a new –mainly urban– class of Vietnamese tied to the French presence, including members of the colonial bureaucracy, economic middlemen, various professionals (from lawyers to school teachers) and a small group of petty bourgeois who acted as a brake on nationalist aspirations. Ironically, it was out of this fast-growing urban class that the first stirrings of modern Vietnamese nationalism could be felt. As early as 1909, people like Lương Văn Can and Phan Bội Châu taught Vietnamese urbanites the principles of modern Western economics and law. Throughout the following decades, the anti-colonial movement grew in diversity and complexity, reaching not only the urban but also the rural indigenous population (see Marr 1971). However, it was not until the peasants and the new Vietnamese industrial proletariat supported the nationalist cause in the 1920s that serious resistance to French occupation coalesced.

The Vietnamese Communist Party, led by Ho Chi Minh seized power at the end of WWII. During the war, colonial France aligned itself with the Vichy government; colonial Việt Nam authorized the Japanese to enter and use the Vietnamese territory and resources for military purposes. In the first months of 1945, Japan's collaboration with the French authorities came to an abrupt end when the Japanese staged a coup, overthrowing the French civil administration, disarming the French troops, and taking full command. Hence, while the Japanese had no intention to prop up the nationalist movement in Việt Nam, and certainly not a socialist one, their intervention undermined the 80-year-old French colonial rule and gave the revolutionary forces a chance to take control of the country. The toppling of the French colonial regime and imminent demise of the Japanese empire indeed created a political vacuum. This provided a window for the Communist Front to assert itself before the victorious Allied forces arrived to occupy Việt Nam. The Việt Minh seized upon this opportunity and took Hà Nội in August 1945. This led to the famed “August Revolution.”

Independence, however, was short lived. By the end of 1946 after some bitter fighting in Hà Nội, the north –or at least its cities and the less remote areas– was ruled once again by the French. This marked the beginning of the first Indochina War, which was to last until 1953. In 1954, the French government agreed to split Việt Nam into two zones, creating a communist north (known as the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam or DRV) under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, and a non-Communist southern half.

Only a decade later, a second major conflict erupted in Việt Nam: the infamous Second Indochina War (known today as the “Vietnam War”). The story of this war is the subject of innumerable publications and will not be recounted in detail here. This war differed from the conflict with the French in that it was an attack by one state against another launched from distant territorial bases with methods that had not been available to France. The strategy of the United States against the north, which involved heavy aerial bombing and naval shelling, was to systematically destroy industry, transportation networks, and public buildings. Many cities, towns and villages were targeted, and nearly every road and railway bridge was destroyed by bombing (see figure 7). Between 1955 and 1975, an estimated 3 percent of the population of the north died and many more were wounded (Thrift and Forbes 1986: 85).



**Figure 7 : Hà Nội after heavy bombings**

Source: Corbis

The independence period in Northern Việt Nam was thus dominated by wartime. The French and American bombardments and fighting thoroughly impacted urban and regional development in the delta. At different moments, the delta population moved in and out of the cities, at one moment seeking refuge from violence and famine in the countryside, and at another moment avoiding becoming the targets of urban guerrillas and bombings. French and American aggressions destroyed a significant part of the delta’s industrial and transportation infrastructure. In the aftermath, considerable human and material resources were devoted to rebuilding them.

At the same time, the delta witnessed the rise of an autonomous Vietnamese state. This new state came to power with a novel view of development. Even during the war years, the new government experimented with communism. From the beginning of this

experiment, in the 1940s, up to the official launch of the *Đổi mới* in the 1980s, policies were formulated that aimed to reshape societal, economic and spatial aspects of urban and rural life the RDD region along socialist lines.

### 3.1 Hà Nội: Population Fluctuations in War and Peace

The population of Hà Nội fluctuated widely through the independence period. Rapid rural-to-urban movements began during the Japanese occupation. In a few short years, Japanese troops pillaged Việt Nam. This resulted in serious rice shortages in both the countryside and the city. During the subsequent conflict between the Việt Minh and the French, the scarcity increased in Hà Nội:

[U]rban life was made almost unbearable by an absence of grain reserves (due to an earlier famine throughout the North) and severance of access to agricultural areas by French encirclement. The civilian population not only had a strong motivation to leave the city but also burdened the forces to remain, in consequence, virtually all citizens but the defenders either fled or were evacuated. (Turley 1975: 371)

By 1949 the population of Hà Nội had dropped to 10,000 (as compared to 120,000 in the greater metropolitan area in 1943). The demographic tide shifted again with the return of the French to Hà Nội. The city's population rapidly recovered and expanded well beyond pre-war levels. In the first few years of the French re-occupation of the Indochinese capital, former residents who had fled the city during the war formed the bulk of the in-migration. But by the end of the 1940s, the number of rural migrants exceeded that of urban migrants. By 1954, the population of Hà Nội's metropolitan area was estimated at roughly 450,000 (Papin 2001: 305).

The significance of instability in motivating this migration from rural areas is not clear, but the attraction of the service and supply economy which developed during the last years of the French colonial government certainly played a major role (Turley 1975: 373). During this period, as the number and salaries of military and administrative personnel rose, so too did the demand for foreign goods and locally-produced basic commodities. War-damaged production facilities spawned the growth of petty trade (Logan 2000: 137).

When the DRV government regained power and control over Hà Nội at the end of the First Indochina War it attempted to send part of the newly arrived migrant population back to the countryside (Papin 2001: 307). It is not certain whether this de-urbanization policy was ever implemented or whether it simply failed to achieve any population reduction. In any case, by 1960 the metropolitan region of Hà Nội had grown to about

650,000 people. The average annual increase since 1954 has been about six percent, a growth rate much lower than during the First Indochinese War years but still double the national average (Turley 1975: 373).

This urban growth was once again reversed by wartime. During the Second Indochina War, “the aged, children, the unemployed, shopkeepers, and craftsmen, and anyone else not directly contributing to the defence of the city or to essential services and production, were sent to the countryside” (Logan 2000: 168). The first wave of evacuation reached its peak in 1968, by which time about one-third to one-half of Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, and other major cities were evacuated to rural areas (Fall 1967). Late in 1970, when the United States’ first major air campaign ended, the population of Hà Nội was estimated at 200,000, less than the level of 1931. Yet, by 1972, the city had once again considerably recovered and exceeded its pre-war level. When the United States resumed bombing in and around Hà Nội in 1972, the greater urban region’s population was well over one million (Turley 1975: 389).

When bombing resumed in April 1972, as many as 700,000 people were evacuated (60 percent of the population of peri-urban Hà Nội and 75 percent of the population of central Hà Nội). By the end of the year, this exodus had reduced the metropolitan region’s population to 480,000. Once again, the cessation of bombing in January 1973 saw the return of many evacuees, but also large numbers of new migrants from rural villages. Shortly after the bombing ended, the population was estimated to be 1.3 million (100,000 more than the estimated level just prior to the 1972 bombings) (Turley 1975: 389). By 1979, the population of the city reached 1.2 million with another 1.3 million in peri-urban areas of the municipality (Logan 2000: 192). By then, Hà Nội experienced a refugee problem and a spurt in real population growth.

### **3.2 Post-War Urban Infrastructures and Housing Crises**

However heroic Hà Nội’s defence from a military or diplomatic point of view, it left the city in a state of devastation and disarray. Lacking financial resources, redevelopment progressed slowly and the civic administration struggled to provide necessary urban infrastructure and services.

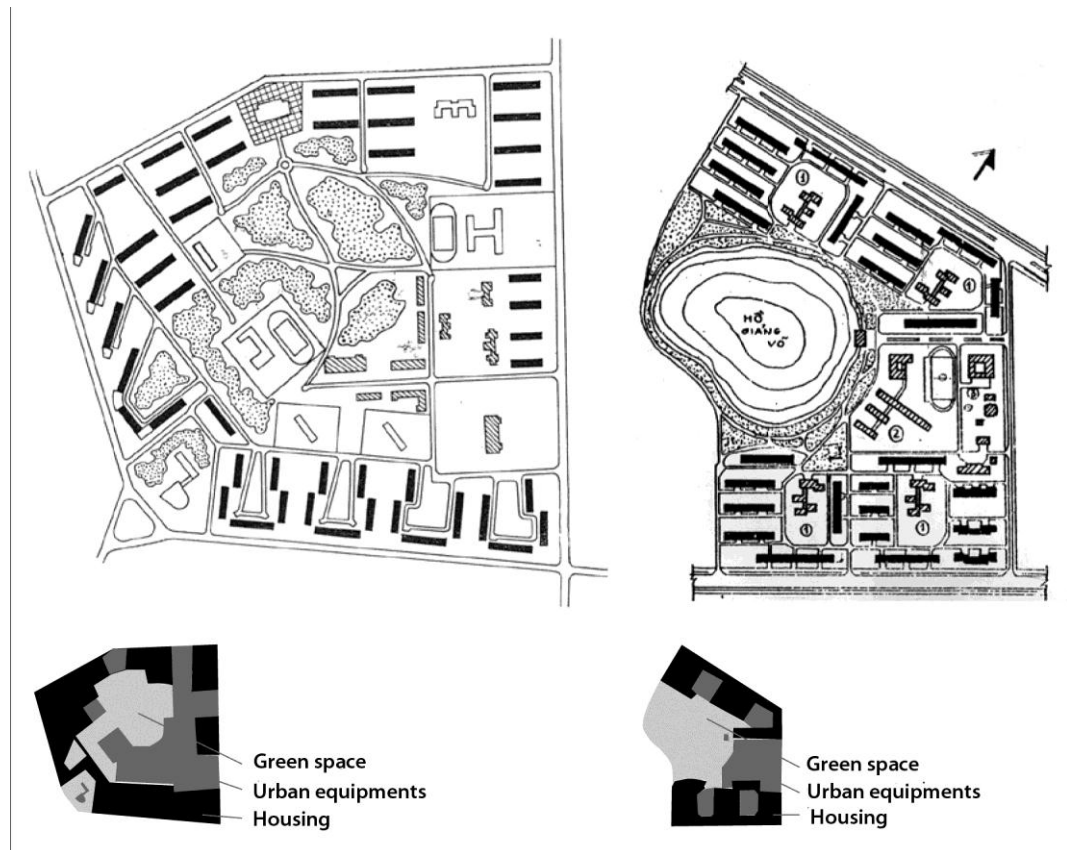
The most serious obstacle to immediate reoccupation of the city was the shortage of housing. The socialist government attempted to cope with this situation by building large-scale and inexpensive residential estates to house the city’s growing population. A

sharp distinction can be drawn between the French who had given low priority to the new suburbs and outlying villages and the socialist municipal government's construction program targeting the peri-urban zone. In its approach to housing development, Việt Nam followed a Soviet model. The Vietnamese planners and architects were especially inspired by Sokolov's concept of "microrayon," a model aimed at creating an "urban pocket" where residents are provided with all necessities:

Using a formula that related accommodation space, facilities, and infrastructure to population size, these largely self-contained "living quarters" attempted to put into practice the notion of equality that was at the heart of socialist ideology. In Việt Nam, the formula was based on 60,000 to 70,000 people; that is, the number of residents that an area would require to support a viable senior high school. Once the formula was calculated, the living quarters were replicated about suburban Hà Nội. (Logan 2000: 206)

The first such new estates were developed in the 1960s (see figure 8), using a combination of traditional hand labour and Hà Nội's first mechanical cranes. These developments also saw the first experiments with prefabricated residential buildings. Accommodation provided by the Vietnamese government was almost entirely in medium-rise apartment blocks, maximizing the use of land while minimizing infrastructure costs. Apartments were basic in design and amenities: "four or five families each had a living room measuring 10 to 24 square metres, depending on number of family members, but shared the same kitchen, toilets and bathrooms. The average space allocated per person by the authority was, in theory, four square metres; in practice it deteriorated to about half that area" (ibid: 204).

The socialist programs never met the burgeoning demand for housing. Part of the problem was that, according to socialist economic precepts, 90 percent of public funds were allocated for production. Housing and urban development were seen as belonging to the consumption sector and, up to 1986, received no more than 2 percent of the budget (Dao Thi Thu Huong 1999: 1). In the period 1955-65, Hà Nội succeeded in building about 100,000 square metres of accommodation. This satisfied only one-sixth of the demand. The war years saw essentially no new housing projects.



**Figure 8 : Spatial organization of two collective housing areas of Hà Nội**

Source: Cerise (2010), p.185.

The state's commitment to universal public housing provision while officially discouraging private construction became increasingly problematic. A large part of Hà Nội's growing population was caught in a bind: it was illegal to construct a dwelling privately, yet the state could not provide badly-needed housing. As early as the 1960s, Turley (1975) writes that:

Some citizens and officials found it expedient to solve problems on private initiatives or to take advantage of passing opportunities, resulting in self-indulgence, private aggrandizement and circumvention of socialist institutions. The extremely high demand for housing, for example, led to slapdash construction of row-houses in areas scheduled for future development projects, sometimes unlicensed entrepreneurs but also by authorized agencies that chose to disregard regulations. (ibid: 391)

### 3.3 From Colonial Dependency to Socialist Shortcomings

The beginning of the First Indochina War deeply affected Hà Nội's economy: "In two months of fighting between 19 December 1946 and 17 February 1947, all of the city's essential services and most of its industry were destroyed" (Turley 1975: 371). During

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the last few years when they held control of the city (1947-1954), the French failed to rebuild the small colonial industrial base destroyed during the war. Instead, and as discussed above, they grossly expanded the city's commercial, service, and administrative functions and created a supply economy heavily dependent upon France.

The consequences of an inflated economy were threefold. As mentioned previously, it attracted substantial rural migration into the city. Second, Hà Nội's economy became increasingly reliant on external supply, not only from France but also from south Việt Nam (in 1953, 80 percent of Hà Nội's rice came from the Saigon area) (Logan 2000). Third, the need for consumer goods and services contributed to the development of an urban economy dominated by small retailers. "By mid-1954, about 40,000 market stallholders, shopkeepers, peddlers and sidewalk hawkers serviced a metropolitan area population of 380,000-400,000. One family in every two relied on this informal sector to survive" (Thrift and Forbes 1986: 143).

After taking the reins of power in Hà Nội in October 1954, the city government, propped by the new communist regime, was therefore confronted with an urban economy very far from the socialist ideal. In late 1954, Hà Nội had an industrial sector consisting of only a handful of small privately owned factories plus a few hundred small private machine shops. Owing to the general scarcity of raw materials, they were all poorly equipped and operating erratically (Logan 2000). Unemployment stood at about one-fifth of the city's population and of those employed, only a fraction belonged to the industrial working class. The rest were essentially stallholders, shop owners, peddlers and sidewalk hawkers (Thrift and Forbes 1986: 144). As noted by Turley (1975: 375), "In the view of ideological Marxist purists, the city must have appeared to be irredeemably petit bourgeois". The city was also faced with food insecurity and shortage problems. Although the agricultural supply chain was re-established following the end of the war, the subsequent partition of the country cut off the city to many essential foodstuffs and forced Hà Nội to develop ways to ensure enough food was available.

The DRV government tackled these economic structure and food supply problems through its First and Second Three-Year Plans (1958-60 and 1961-64). Two specific policies for Hà Nội were adopted. First, an urban industrial base had to be built. Following two years of "economic rehabilitation" in 1956 and 1957 (during which time private production was permitted in order to reduce unemployment), the new government of Hà Nội attempted to "socialize" and expand the city's industrial infrastructure. Hundreds of small-scale enterprises owned by "capitalists" were thus re-organized and merged into a small number of joint state-private and co-operative

enterprises. Large merchants were made agents of the State Trading Corporation or compelled to share ownership with the state (Thrift and Forbes 1986: 145). Seeking to transform Hà Nội from a “colonial consumption city into a producing city”, the first Three Year Plan also created industrial sites throughout the city but especially in the outskirts (Turley 1975: 377).

Second, the city government needed to restore the interdependence between the 12 square kilometres of Hà Nội’s inner city (*nội thành*) and the 140 square kilometres of its peri-urban or suburban zone (*ngoại thành*), which in normal times were Hà Nội’s main source of vegetables and other staples. To this end, the city government first extended the territory under its jurisdiction to include the major food growing areas of the periphery. These peri-urban districts were made the focus of an intensive campaign to increase agricultural productivity (Thrift and Forbes 1986: 144-5).

By the mid-1960s, Hà Nội was again at war and most development projects were put on hold. Following operation “Rolling Thunder” in 1966, “government offices were relocated up to 75 kilometres away and 90 percent of industries were dismantled and scattered...” (Logan 2000: 158). When bombing was resumed again in April of 1972, production facilities were further decentralized. This rapid decentralization of the economy was one of the key elements enabling industrial production to continue throughout the war. Nevertheless, many of the external economies associated with urban concentration of industry were likely lost (Beresford 1988: 134).

Following the end of the Second Indochina war, Hà Nội gradually returned to normal. But the reconstruction of economic infrastructure proved chaotic. Large-scale industries in particular were slow to return to pre-war production levels. Foreign aid dried up soon after reunification and very few wide-ranging projects were thereafter implemented. As a result, some ideologically “unorthodox” practices were tolerated or even encouraged if they helped the city to recover. Indeed, only the handicraft sector was successful in maintaining an increasing level of production. The 50,000-60,000 people producing handicrafts quasi-privately were encouraged to produce more. This expansion was facilitated by black markets which sprang up to fill the gap in supply and production (Turley 1975: 395). The regime sought to exploit this productive resource, even if it meant compromising ideological purity. Hence, as had happened following the resistance, and has would happen again during the socialist transition, it was the handicraft industry that drove Việt Nam’s economic recovery.

### 3.4 Governing the Socialist City

A significant problem arose following the transfer of power. The Party's guerrilla tactics conflicted with the peacetime need for strong centralized state and a stable bureaucracy. While the Vietnamese staff of the colonial administration were viewed with great suspicion by communist leaders, these French-trained bureaucrats were indispensable to the management of the city: "they were the only ones able to operate the complicated machine which is a developed city, its radio communications, its electrical network, its water system, its land registry, its archives, its public works" (Papin 2001: 320, my translation). The new urban government therefore offered these "re-used civil servants" (*công chức lưu dụng*) the same salaries they had received under the French, an income four times greater than the earnings of ordinary civil servants.

It took several years to establish an effective socialist urban governance system even with the help of French-trained bureaucrats. To this end, the socialist government proceeded to restructure the "administration" of "local" and "main street" systems developed under the French. When the military presence in municipal government ended, four prefectures were created in the inner city to mediate between the Municipal Administrative Committee and the eight new wards that comprised the city. Each ward was in turn divided into street committees (*tổ dân phố*) averaging 2,500 to 5,000 people, and each committee divided further into five or six cells of thirty to forty households. These cells bore collective responsibility for certain civic duties and mass campaigns (Turley 1975: 377).

Under this system the ward became the lowest level of administrative authority, with the blocks and cells providing support to the wards and linkage between the municipal government and citizens. These sub-administrative units took on several of the representative, security, and mobilization functions. In conjunction with food rationing, population registration and popular participation in the maintenance of order and security, the reforms enabled the DRV to influence behaviour and obtain the support of an expanded urban population to a much greater extent than the French had ever achieved (Papin 2001). At the administrative level, the city government was more decentralized and distant, but the system also promoted individual and community involvement on a smaller scale. Indeed, cells, wards and street committees served as venues for maintaining open channels of communication between officials and the population. Although the street committees were intended to be instruments of the wards, it was not uncommon for them to arrogate some of the authority and duties of the wards in response to pressure from below (Turley 1975: 378).

### 3.5 Building a Socialist Rural Economy and Society: Initial Conditions

At the regional scale, the Vietnamese Communist Party had ambitious plans for the territory and the population under its control. Like in the case of most other communist countries, it sought state ownership of the means of production, comprehensive planning of the economy, free provision of the basic necessities of life, and the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Vietnamese communist leaders were inspired by their first hand experience of Soviet and Chinese Communism in the 1940s and 1950s to conceive their model.

An outstanding feature of this model is its concern with industrial growth and the concomitant need to extract significant surplus from the agricultural sector. Developed in the Eastern and Central European context, it proved difficult to implement in Northern Việt Nam where very different initial conditions of development prevailed. To put it bluntly, Việt Nam’s development lagged very far behind that of other communist countries. Assessing the situation in 1954, Lê Duẩn (who was to become the first secretary of the Party in 1960) writes: “We are building socialism, but on a small scale and basically an agricultural economy still prevails [...] We produce not a kilogram of steel or a kilogram of chemicals. Electricity is sufficient only to light a few cities. Engineering comprises only small repair workshops” (quoted in Nyland 1981: 426).

In the late 1950s, the DRV thus faced two major challenges to building a Soviet-style socialist economy and society. The first challenge arose from the agricultural crisis. Even after the first agrarian land reform, the population of the RRD could not rely on its territory to provide enough food to meet its own needs:

In 1954 a good proportion of the people of North Việt Nam lived near to starvation, the result of not enough food to satisfy the needs of the rapidly growing population. In the confused aftermath of the World War II, for example, nearly 2 million people had died of starvation –10% of the population. The deaths were concentrated in the Red River Delta [...] By 1954 the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam had the lowest per capita area of cultivated land in the world, yet 90% of the population depended on agriculture for their livelihood. (Thrift and Forbes 1986: 70)

Extracting agricultural surpluses from the Northern Vietnamese region to support industrial development was a serious (if not impossible) challenge.

Second, the country lacked an industrial base. Even though the French colonial authorities did not actively support industrialization, a small set of manufacturing industries had grown in the North during the 1930s (Robequain 1939; Miller 1947). However, by 1954 the French had dismantled most of their factories and, as discussed before, the First Indochina War destroyed much of the remaining industrial base.

Charrière (cited in Nyland 1981: 431) claims that the modern manufacturing sectors consisted of just seven large enterprises (including a distillery brewer and an ice-making plant). Although it may seem as a slight overstatement, this account is probably not far from the truth: heavy industry was certainly in very short supply in the DRV.

### 3.6 The Collectivization of Agriculture

What was the response of the new regime to these twin problems of lack of food and industry? A first strategy consisted in improving agricultural production. The shifts in agricultural development policy and patterns of agricultural production during the Democratic and later Socialist Republic are well documented (Beresford 1988; Fforde 1989; Vickerman 1986; Woodside 1971b), and so only the main points will be highlighted here.

The first significant transformation of the delta's space-economy took place in the rural areas between 1953 and 1956 in the form of rent reduction and of land reform. The campaign first aimed at refunding part of the rent collected from peasants during the 1940s (Moise 1976: 71). The rural class struggle later took a more serious turn. The population was sorted into five "classes" ranging from landlord to agricultural worker. This allowed the identification of small rural economic elite deemed responsible for the prevailing "backward relations of production" (Beresford 1988: 129). In theory, land owned by the elite was to be confiscated and redistributed equally among individuals belonging to less wealthy rural classes. In practice, in many villages, the land reform turned into an uncontrollable witch-hunt:

Land reform cadres in some villages saw landlords, lackeys of the landlords, and landlord conspiracies everywhere. It was considered a great accomplishment to expose as a reactionary, or as a landlord, someone who had not previously been known to be one. The result was that many people were denounced for things they had never done, and probably over 30,000 peasant households were wrongly classified as landlords. (Moise 1976: 83)

The campaign's excesses produced increasing unrest culminating, in 1956, in a rebellion in Nghệ An (Fall 1967). In spite of these political difficulties, the land reform was an economic success. It returned land to those peasants who had been denied. Even if it did not establish complete equality of landholdings, it redistributed enough land to substantially raise the poorest peasant's living standards.

The DRV launched agricultural collectivization in the RRD in 1959. According to socialist theory, this was expected to allow a technical revolution leading to productivity gains, create a new agricultural proletariat, and contribute to the social appropriation of land under socialism (Beresford 1988:137; Vickerman 1986: 3).The first stage involved

the institutionalization of existing collective practices of traditional Vietnamese wet-rice agriculture (joint transplanting and harvesting, lending of tools and draft animals, etc.). The next stage was the creation of “lower-level cooperatives.” Land and means of production were incorporated into the production collectives in exchange for a small rent (in proportion to the amount contributed). A system of work-points was established along with norms for agricultural tasks (so many hectares ploughed per day, so much fertilizer distributed, etc.). Income was then distributed to workers and based on the amount of crops harvested *after* payment of the collectives’ taxes and compulsory deliveries to the state, as well as that portion set aside for collective accumulation and social funds. These were used to provide facilities such as health clinics, child care, and assistance for poor and disabled members of the collective (Vickerman 1986: chapter 4).

Income distribution in the collectives was thus carried out according to contributions to the means of production, on the one hand, and labour, on the other. In the third stage of the collectivization process, “higher-level” cooperatives were established. In this final stage, all remuneration was based on labour productivity only and the rents allocated to former owners of land and means of production were eliminated. By 1981, virtually all of North Việt Nam’s peasants were incorporated, at least in principle, into these advanced cooperatives (Fforde 1989). After this time, “a process of gradually increasing the size of the cooperatives was set in motion by amalgamating smaller cooperatives, usually at village level, but nothing on the scale of China’s communes was ever attempted. Nor did the Vietnamese try any of the more radical aspects of Chinese communal life seen during China’s disastrous “Great Leap Forward” (Beresford 1988: 130).

Collectives and cooperatives contributed positively to economic growth and to society in general. Output stayed above the 1950s level and cropping intensity generally increased during the first few years of the program. The advent of collective farming also gave most Vietnamese women an independent voice in village councils. The establishment of collectively-run child care and education facilities also gave them more time to engage in remunerative work. The establishment of health care centres and advances in the prevention of disease were beneficial to all levels of rural society. Social stratification considerably decreased as poor families were able to gain access to more advanced means of production. Hence, “the sight of a human being harnessed to the plough because they could not afford a buffalo or ox disappeared from the Vietnamese landscape” (ibid: 131).

Besides these social advancements, by the mid-1970s, a number of critics of the collective agricultural system were already pointing to the failure of output to rapidly expand, the stagnation of land yields and, most importantly, the decline of labour productivity. The proximate causes of this poor performance were thought to be the inability of collective farming to mobilize the workforce. When possible, peasants were both avoiding participation in collective work and working at low intensity when they did turn up (Fforde 1989; Vickerman 1986). From the point of view of the socialist state, the chief consequence of the low agricultural productivity was that marketed agricultural surpluses were insufficient to support its own accumulation requirements. In fact, by the 1980s, the official goal was no longer to extract agricultural surpluses but simply to find ways to increase productivity in order to feed the population and avoid famines (Dang Phong 2004).

### **3.7 Population Redistribution and New Economic Zones**

It rapidly became clear that the mere implementation of a socialist mode of agricultural production in the overpopulated delta's countryside would not yield the kind of surplus which could eventually support the development of heavy industries. The extraction of agricultural surplus from Northern Việt Nam called for a diminution of population, more land, or a mix of both. In line with this, starting in the early 1960s, the DRV crafted a series of population redistribution policies leading to the launch of the so-called New Economic Zones (hereafter NEZ) program.

From a demographic standpoint, these policies aimed primarily at easing excessive densities in the RRD. Before 1976, they were designed to move population from the delta's plain to its more rugged and mountainous rim. After reunification, peasants were also sent to the less densely-populated Mekong delta region. The population redistribution program also had economic objectives. It tried to facilitate the redeployment of the labour force over the national territory, to increase food production, to solve the unemployment problem, to facilitate crop specialization, to pave the way for the establishment of state farms and lay the groundwork for rapid collectivization (Desbarats 1987).

After 1976, the population redistribution program was revised and expanded. It became a key element in Vietnamese planning, and, of all the new government's agricultural projects, the one officially given highest priority. In its updated version, the population redistribution program tried to concentrate displaced people into new communities outside of the two main deltas. This strategy was expected to free potentially fertile land

for agricultural purposes and facilitate rural electrification. It was planned to increase the area under cultivation from 5.6 to 7 million hectares overall (Nguyen Duc Nhuan 1978: 337).

From their inception in 1961 to their premature abandonment in 1979, both the population redistribution and NEZs development programs fell short of their intended objectives. Between 1961 and 1975, while one million people were moved out of the delta region and to the highlands, the total population of the Northern plain increased by 8 million. From 1976 to late 1977, 82 NEZs were founded in Southern provinces. Yet only 625,000 persons actually relocated there from the densely populated Northern provinces. This number was less than half of the government's original plans for that period (Jones 1982).

The economic performance of agricultural production in the NEZs was also very poor. The disappointing results were initially attributed to natural disasters such as droughts, floods, or locust infestations. In fact, both the planning and the execution of the population redistribution program were ridden with problems. "Much of the land "colonized" by the Vietnamese state was barren or was forested terrain on which farming was impossible. The unsuitability of much of this marginal land for fallow cultivation was aggravated by lack of fertilizers, pesticides, and good seeds, and by degradation resulting from the clearing of the forest cover" (Desbarats 1987: 70). Further reasons for the low economic efficiency of the NEZ program may include the selection of the settlers and their living conditions:

In most NEZs, living conditions were extremely harsh. Although officially, settlers were supposed to receive six months' worth of food supplies, some seeds and tools, and a hut, they frequently received none of these [...] former urban dwellers—lacking farming skills, resentful of their new assignments, and often malnourished—existed on the edge of starvation. Lack of medicines increased the incidence of disease. Malaria and dysentery were rampant, pneumonia and skin diseases widespread. Shortage of all kinds and poor sanitary conditions caused such hardship and deprivation that death rates rose, particularly among young children and the aged. (ibid: 71)

### **3.8 The Hộ Khẩu Constraint**

From the onset, official claims about the success of the rural resettlement program were countered by rumours that the program was actually running into difficulties because settlers were leaving to return to their place of origin (Nguyễn Duc Nhuan 1978). Whether they decided to actually go back to their village or live in the city, the life of returnees was made very difficult by the state's population control system.

Imported from China, where it is known as the *hùkǒu*, the *hộ khẩu* system was formally implemented in Vietnamese urban areas in 1955, and extended gradually throughout the countryside over the following decades (Li 1996). Under this system, only those people recognized by the state, through the *hộ khẩu* registration system, as resident in a given locality had access to basic services; no services were provided to those living in other localities. The same went for access to land and housing, education, health, and employment. To live without a *hộ khẩu* was to live without the rights granted to Vietnamese citizens under the law.

The *hộ khẩu* system gave the state a far superior population administration tool than had previously existed in the history of the RRD region. This system was used by the state to control the entire population and was a basic building block for Việt Nam's socialist vision of regional planning. Despite regular changes in the legislative details, the system was aimed primarily at facilitating the population redistribution plans and at preventing rural-to-urban migration. Local population planning, the administration of social services, and up to the 1980s, the distribution of commodities under the command economy were all linked to this system.

Hardy's (2001) analysis suggests that some room for manoeuvring outside of the *hộ khẩu* system was left to the Vietnamese population. Family and official support offered such opportunities. This, he argues, can partly be attributed to the complex structure of the Vietnamese state:

Different government departments were responsible for the administration of different policies. Household registration and identification was a police matter. Employment was managed by the co-operative. Distribution of foodstuffs was supervised by the cereal department. The rules governing each policy, moreover, were often incomplete and subject to regional variation. (ibid: 195)

Overlaps and contradictions in the state's regulations created opportunities to navigate between official rules, notably through the use of personal relationships to informally access services. Despite the possibility of manoeuvring outside the system, doing so was not easy; most migrants to the city and rural returnees from NEZs remained dependent on the generosity of their relatives, and even with such help, most lived a life of misery.

### **3.9 Chronic Imbalance and the Problem of Industrial Development**

Many of the economic problems facing the DRV were exacerbated at the macroeconomic level by the development strategy pursued by the Vietnamese state until the 1980s. From its inception, the DRV prioritized "heavy industry" while only a minor

portion of the state's investment effort went towards the production of consumer goods (Vickerman 1986: 34). In the 1960s, the Vietnamese government began to invest heavily in steel making, coal mining, electric power generation, rolling stock, machine tools, cement and other basic industries.

The resulting industrial base was faced with many problems. First, it had very few linkages to the rest of the economy, which remained overwhelmingly agrarian. Secondly, while the first few years of socialist industrial development witnessed tremendous growth, Vietnamese outputs alone could barely serve the needs of the densely populated delta. This became highly problematic during war years when industrial production moved to the countryside and slowed down considerably. Thirdly, in both war and peace times, the paucity of infrastructural development in the region created unusually large teething problems in the establishment of technically complex industries (like steel-making). The resource demands of large-scale construction projects could not be met by existing industrial capacity or through imports. Furthermore, because of supply uncertainties, enterprise managers had strong incentives to hoard scarce materials or resort to black markets, thus exacerbating shortages. Finally, urban employees, unable to subsist on their official state allotments, increasingly looked to market-based mechanisms, despite government efforts to suppress them (Beresford 1988: 141-3).

The shortage issue was addressed through external support. During the war, North Việt Nam received substantial amounts of foreign aid from China, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. After 1960, a large share of this aid was tied to importing capital goods and raw materials but, after 1965, the emerging shortages of commodities made importing these goods the new priority. Rather than becoming the self-sufficient industrial economy envisaged by successive plans, Việt Nam was becoming increasingly dependent on other socialist countries. In the 1970s, Chinese commodity aid (which had greatly contributed to stabilizing Vietnamese society during the war by supplying basic goods and rice to both urban and rural populations) was halted amid deteriorating relations between the two countries. By the 1980s, Soviet aid had also dried up, leaving Việt Nam alone to deal with an under-productive collectivized agrarian sector, and a dysfunctional industrial sector perpetually hampered by shortages of raw materials.

### **3.10 The 'Other' Industrial World: The Làng Nghề**

Considering the progress in industrial development made in Northern Việt Nam throughout the socialist period, Thrift and Forbes (1986: 127) found that "what industrial growth there was mainly occurred, partly by default and partly by design, in

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the more decentralized sector”. In the shadow of the great (and doomed) heavy-industry projects of the DRV government existed a *de facto* “other” industrial world: small firms and artisan workshops outside the major towns which carried on the RRD region’s cottage industry tradition.

As pointed out earlier in this paper, the pre-colonial economy of the RRD village, while mostly dependent upon wet-rice agricultural production, was often complemented by small-scale handicraft production. This economic form not only persisted in villages but seems to have expanded during the colonial period. Surveying the delta during the 1930s, Gourou was amazed by the variety of goods produced in craft villages (*làng nghề*) and the complexity of their production structure. By the end of the colonial period, the small-scale industrial base in villages held greater promise for the economic development of Việt Nam than large-scale modern industries:

Peasant and family owned and operated industry could, in the long run, give rise to a far superior industrial base. Large-scale industry and its costly inputs have no place in this country, which does not have sufficient market opportunities for it [...] But small workshops, located in the countryside, close to villages providing plentiful and undemanding labour [...] would seemingly have a strong basis for existence and it is through them that we could see modern techniques introduced among the Vietnamese peasantry. (Gourou 1965: 538, my translation)

As discussed before, this was not the conclusion reached by the DRV government. Up to the socialist transition, small-scale activities of craft villages remained at the periphery of the state’s plans. Initially, small private industrialists were incorporated in joint state-private enterprises. Artisan-traders, as a class of people that crossed the boundaries of productive and non-productive labour, were neither encouraged nor forbidden as long as they retained their self-sufficient peasant and individual craft-worker character, and sold their surplus in local markets or through state authorized agents.

From 1965 onward, rural collective craft producers were encouraged to participate in the heavy-industrialization effort as subcontractors to state companies. Further developments were curtailed by the Second Indochina War and all plans were put on hold. During the period of the war, up to the mid-1970s, craft producers’ efforts shifted to the supply of basic goods to the civilian population and war materials to the military (DiGregorio 2001: 24-25).

This so-called “local” or “regional” industry of the RRD region (which the government ultimately hoped to replace with a modern centralized industrial base) not only persisted but expanded under the communist government. “In 1962, this form of industry

provided work for about 550,000 artisans (mainly in the cooperatives) and 40,000 workers, producing 63 percent of consumer goods and representing 43 percent of the means of production. The value of this “local” industry (including the artisan component) kept growing, reaching 55 percent of total industrial production in 1972” (Thrift and Forbes 1986: 77). In the wake of the *Đổi mới* reforms, village-based handicraft industry diversified and modernized. As in the city, this rural small-scale industrial base played a major role in allowing Việt Nam to recover economically after the economic crisis of the 1980s (DiGregorio 2001).

## Conclusion: Ruptures and Continuities

During the historical period that is the focus of this paper (from approximately 1890 to 1980) the RRD witnessed tremendous changes, some of which were highlighted. The purpose of this paper was to illustrate the scope of urban and regional transformations that took place in the delta during this tumultuous period.

### Transformations

Most obvious is the region's tremendous population growth. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rural population of the delta more than doubled from about 6 million in 1886 to some 13.5 million people in 1984. During the same period, the metropolitan area population of Hà Nội increased twenty-fold from 125,000 to roughly 2.5 million people. This urbanization process was accompanied by the emergence of a much sharper urban-rural divide. As discussed earlier, the French first contributed to the development of specifically urban forms, institutions, economies, and way of life. The socialist government's distinctive approach to urban development further entrenched the urban-rural divide. This phenomenon is tied to the application of the *hộ khẩu* system, thus limiting rural to urban movements of people, goods, and ideas that had characterized Hà Nội since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Starting during the colonial period, the RRD region benefited from infrastructural, agricultural, and industrial modernization projects. French improvements of the delta's dike system put an end to floods, which had until then devastated the delta's harvests and engendered widespread famines with ominous regularity. Improved agricultural techniques and the use of chemical fertilizers during the colonial and post-colonial periods also contributed to increasing rice yields. In addition, if the introduction of industrial production techniques never really led to the development of a strong, large-scale industrial sector, the socialist (and to a lesser extent French) governments' economic policies nevertheless effectively opened pre-colonial Northern Việt Nam's closed economy to both domestic exchanges and international markets.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw the last Vietnamese emperor and the vanishing of the dynastic state. With the rise of a socialist regime, both urban and rural areas enjoyed a more modernized governance structure. For the first time in the history of northern Việt Nam, state-society relations were no longer mediated by the village-based authority. The state could from now on interact directly with, while increasing its control on, individual citizens. In this sense, the Communist Party succeeded in penetrating local communities to an extent never reached by former rulers. Local governance reform was accompanied by the implementation of a far more egalitarian political system than had previously

existed. Under the socialist regime, although candidates are appointed by the Party, local governments are elected to represent their communities. If citizen's rights were to a certain degree limited by the *hộ khẩu* system, the socialist state overall considerably broadened the definition of Vietnamese citizenship.

While the collectivization of agriculture did not bring the expected economic results, in the social sphere it provided important political and economic independence to many peasants, particularly women. Women benefited not only from the achievement of equal rights to income from land, but as well from the provision of childcare, health care and education facilities. This reform helped improve women's welfare and status and relieve them of much of their workload. The guarantee of equal rights for women even encouraged them to get involved in political life for the first time in the history of northern Việt Nam. Local schools, childcare centres and clinics were established which provided the vast majority of peasants access to previously unavailable education and basic healthcare.

### **Historical Continuity**

Besides these major transformations, a few fundamental features and persistent patterns have characterized the RRD region's urban and regional dynamic from the pre-colonial period up to the present times. Four elements of historical continuity will be highlighted.

First, and most obvious, are the constraints posed by the unique environmental conditions of the delta. Today, the construction of regional infrastructure and the extension of the urban perimeter are essentially the same challenges that faced pre-colonial inhabitants. Urbanization in the RRD entails building on soggy and regularly flooded land. As this paper has already shown, two different societal actors have applied specific construction techniques to address this problem. The state, on the one hand, adopted a large-scale, centrally-managed approach aimed at producing large areas of dry land according to a rational plan. This technique was used by the imperial state to build its citadel, by the French for the European quarters, and by the socialist government for Soviet-style housing estates; the same approach is currently being applied in the construction of so-called "New Urban Areas" (*khu đô thị mới*). Individual households, on the other hand, have adopted a small-scale, privately initiated approach aimed at producing small areas of dry land to shelter a single family. It is this approach to urbanization that allowed the development of *Kê Chợ*, from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the densification of peri-urban villages, and the informal peripheral extension of the city from the colonial period up until now.

In Hà Nội, state-led and spontaneous approaches to urbanization have always co-existed. The extent to which one or the other of these development practices have prevailed has changed over time and is primarily reflective of the differing views regarding the appropriateness of each approach and capacities of successive urban governments to implement or control them. The pre-colonial state, although regulating building height and ornamentation, seems to have been relatively indifferent to the co-existence of spontaneous practices in the vicinity of the citadel. Since then, all governments clearly favoured the large-scale, state-led approach and none has yet tried to integrate the “other” urbanization approach into its urban plans. Thus the French expressed contempt for the “indigenous urbanization” and only tolerated it in the Vietnamese suburbs, outside of the European city. The DRV government has also had a clear preference for the rationally planned city with its large-scale housing estates inspired by the “microrayon model.” The socialist state’s tolerance of informal housing practices seems to have been an accommodation strategy to recover from war damages, and to face up to the reality of its structural incapacity to provide housing for all citizens. Despite the fact that the current post-reform government disapproves of and tries to discourage the spontaneous urbanization dynamic, privately initiated construction practices are quasi-legal.

The second element of importance in terms of historical continuity is the density of the delta’s population and settlement system and their associated constraints. Starting during the colonial period, the French authorities recognized the difficulty of modernizing the heavily populated delta:

It is difficult to transform regions such as the Tonkin and North Annam’s deltas, where most of the arable land is under cultivation. The indigenous agricultural practices can no doubt be improved, but through a slow adaptation; Western capital and techniques do not suffice when it comes to transforming the mentality of peasants rooted for the last twenty centuries in a territory. The land itself is quite fragile: it has been shaped by the indigenous peoples to their own purposes; high dikes have enclosed the reach of the river, the villages and fields are protected by these ramparts, all of peasant life is organized little by little in virtue of this moulded and sculpted land; in the communal and overpopulated territory, there is no detail which does not have a value, not a land crease which does not have significance. It is impossible to reshape this as one would new land; one can only alter, touch up, complete. (Robequain 1939: 62, my translation)

Robequain’s comment applies to the delta’s countryside and to its cities. In their attempt to develop and extend Hà Nội, both the colonial and socialist governments tried to address the issue of urbanization in the densely settled and politically well-organized peri-urban areas. The rural population living in pre-existing village communities was able to resist and even hinder urban planners’ ambitions. Responding to this local

resistance, both French and socialist municipal governments laid out a development strategy that aimed at building the city around the pre-existing communities, most often on the less valuable marshland and paddy fields surrounding them. For this reason, up to now, rarely has a peri-urban village been wiped off the map to allow for the completion of a master plan. Hà Nội is thus accurately described as a “city of villages” not only because of its historical core but also because of the *encompassing* rather than the *obliteration* of pre-existing peri-urban communities.

The third historical continuity is the persistence of a small-scale economy. The RRD region has a long tradition of village-based industrial production. As mentioned above, Gourou once believed that this small-scale industry held the key to the economic development of Việt Nam. Although neither the French nor the Communists officially adhered to Gourou’s view, this paper argues that history has proved him right. From the colonial to the post-reform periods decentralized village industries constitute the most flexible, innovative and dynamic part of the Vietnamese economy. Indeed, this sector of the economy has allowed Việt Nam to overcome some of the most important crises it has faced throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rural-based cottage industries provided military materiel to the Việt Minh, supplied commercial goods to rural and urban citizens when the socialist large-scale industrial plans failed to take off, and contributed to a rapid economic recovery and growth after the socioeconomic reforms of the 1980s.

The fourth and final significant historical continuity is the persistent tension between the Vietnamese state’s ambitions to penetrate and control society, and the strong resistance by local governments to central planning. During the pre-colonial and colonial periods, local governments were responsible for administering the majority of problems on a day to day basis, which fostered the development of localized governance rules, norms, and practices. The division of power between the central and local levels changed considerably throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the post-colonial period, the socialist government implemented a highly structured command chain and uniform practices by centralizing the country’s governance system. But even under this system, Việt Nam’s political culture would continue to combine firm ideological dispositions towards centralization of power with pragmatic recognition of local particularities and responsibilities.

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