

Imperial Banishment: French Colonizers and the Exile of Vietnamese Emperors

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Nineteenth-century French monarchs were no strangers to exile.¹ French rulers often also forced their dissident subjects into exile, from *émigrés* after 1789 to opponents of new regimes of the 1800s, including the thousands deported to Algeria after 1848 and even more Communards transported to New Caledonia in 1871. The French likewise imposed exile on indigenous sovereigns and resistance leaders of colonies they conquered (or reconquered). In 1802, they deported Toussaint Louverture from Haiti to France, where he died less than a year later. In 1847, they banished the defeated Abd el-Kader from Algeria, confining him in castles in France for five years before allowing him to continue his exile in the Ottoman empire. At the end of the nineteenth century, the French sent Béhanzin, the ruler of Dahomey, to Martinique (and later to Algeria), banished another western African ruler, Samory Touré, to Gabon in equatorial Africa, and exiled the last queen of Madagascar first to Reunion island and then to Algeria.²

This paper looks at the banishment of three emperors of Vietnam from 1885 to 1916, and focuses particularly on Duy Tan, who after decades of exile in Reunion envisaged returning to his homeland and regaining his throne.³ It argues that deposing and exiling a native ruler provided a powerful weapon in the colonizers' arsenal, especially in protectorates that conquerors wanted to rid of inconvenient potentates while marshalling the status and structures of the traditional dynasties to their own objectives. However, that strategy

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¹ On the general phenomenon, see Philip Mansel and Torsten Riotte, eds., *Monarchy and Exile: The Politics of Legitimacy from Marie de Medicis to Wilhelm II* (London, 2011).

² See, for example, Patrice Louis, *Le Roi Béhanzin: Du Dahomey à la Martinique* (Paris, 2011).

³ In Cambodia, in the period covered by this paper, three royal princes who mounted opposition to the French were banished or went into self-imposed exile: the French sent Duong-Chakr to Algeria in 1893; Prince Yukanthor fled Paris under French menace in 1900 and lived until 1934 in exile in Thailand; and the French expelled Prince Mayura to Vietnam in 1916. See Pierre L. Lamant, "L'Affaire Duong-Chakr," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 67: 246-247 (1980): 123-150; Pierre L. Lamant, *L'Affaire Yukanthor: Autopsie d'un scandale colonial* (Paris, 1989); and on Mayura, John Tully, *Cambodia under the Tricolour: King Sisowath and the "Mission Civilisatrice" 1904-1927* (Clayton, Vic., 1996), 208-209.

undermined the very institutions that the colonizers hoped would legitimise and facilitate their rule. Ironically, depreciating dynasties also discredited them in the eyes of nationalists; the royal house of Vietnam disappeared with decolonisation.

This paper does not provide detailed coverage of the role of the monarchy under French colonialism in Indochina, a subject explored in depth by Nguyen The Anh and other scholars.⁴ Nor does it chronicle the development of anti-colonialism in Vietnam, on which David Marr's study remains the classic account.⁵ Rather it explores exile as a tactic of colonial rulers and considers what the lived experiences of three banished emperors – Ham Nghi, Thanh Thai and Duy Tan – suggest about French governance in Indochina.⁶ It forms part of a larger comparative project on the circumstances in which the French and British banished indigenous rulers, the lives of the deposed monarchs and their entourages in exile, and their place in post-colonial historical narrative and commemoration.

Protectorates, Kings and Colonizers

Colonial conquerors faced the decision of what to do with a ruler whose country they took over: engage in negotiations and try to win his (or, less often, her) collaboration, or to fight and dispose of him through defeat, imprisonment, exile or execution. The prime aim was to make an indigenous leader submit to overlordship, or failing to do so, to remove him. Sometimes colonizers achieved the goal quickly and relatively peacefully, while in other cases pacification took decades or never fully came about. During that process, the French and other Europeans faced elites whose authority rested on complex political, social and cultural systems; the contest was not just between a French conquistador and a native ruler, but between the colonizers and an indigenous elite, and ultimately between two different cultures. The issue of indigenous rulers presented itself in a particular way in *protectorates*, territories over which colonizers established overlordship, but where they left in place, with some nominal power, kings, sultans, maharajahs, beys, deys and other traditional authorities, as well the institutions of the pre-colonial system.

The decision to retain a ruler or a royal house represented an attempt to assuage the objections of geopolitical rivals in the imperial scramble and to galvanise support from the native ruler, his administration and the institutions intertwined with his monarchy. Permitting the dynasty to survive provided at least a fig-leaf to cover naked colonialism. The danger was that individual rulers or their princely relatives could refuse to accept subservience: puppet rulers might pull at the strings. They might serve as rallying-points for opposition to French rule or stir up insurrection. Indeed, this periodically occurred in Indochina, even if Vietnamese republican and Communist nationalism ultimately rejected resistance centred on feudal monarchs. Nevertheless, Søren Ivarsson and Christopher Goscha have argued, with reference to Laos, ‘the importance of taking into account non-revolutionary and non-Communist actors – even members of the royal blood – in order to better understand the complexity that went into the making of modern postcolonial states’ created from colonial configurations.⁷

⁴ Nguyen The Anh, *Monarchie et fait colonial au Viet-Nam (1875-1925): Le Crépuscule d'un ordre traditionnel* (Paris, 1992). See also Oscar Chapuis, *The Last Emperors of Vietnam: From Tu Duc to Bao Dai* (Westport, Conn., 2000); and Bruce McFarland Lockhart, *The End of the Vietnamese Monarchy* (New Haven, Conn., 1993).

⁵ David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley, 1971).

⁶ On the monarchies of the other Indochinese countries, see Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* (Sydney, 1994) among his other works; Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty* (Bangkok, 2009); and Mangkra Souvannaphouma, *Laos: Autopsie d'une monarchie assassinée* (Paris, 2010).

⁷ Søren Ivarsson and Christopher E. Goscha, “Prince Phetsarath (1890–1959): Nationalism and Royalty in the Making of Modern Laos,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38:1 (2007): 55–81.

France's expansion brought it into conflict with venerable royal houses throughout Indochina.⁸ French gunboats, beginning their incursion in 1858, forced Tu Duc, the sovereign of Annam, ruling from his capital in Hué, to cede provinces in the southern part of the country; France administered Cochinchina as a fully-fledged colony from the early 1860s. In 1863, the French established a protectorate over neighbouring Cambodia, where King Norodom agreed to a strategic alliance in fear of Siamese and Vietnamese designs. In the 1870s, France began a push into central and northern Vietnam, though the effort succeeded only in the mid-1880s, and Annam and Tonkin became protectorates of the French, still under the titular rule of the Vietnamese emperor. Finally, in the early 1890s, the French took over Laos, a country lying between Vietnam and Thailand, divided into three major polities. The French ruled the region around Luang Prabang as a "special protectorate" under its king. A dynasty continued to exist in another centre, Champassak, which France administered alongside the third major entity, Vientiane, more directly, though the legal parameters of French control remained cloudy. In 1887, France formed the Indochinese Union, headed by a Governor-General in Hanoi, consisting of the three Vietnamese regions (*ky*) of Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina, Cambodia and, from the 1890s, Laos. The ruler of Annam, the king of Cambodia, and the king of Luang Prabang (often referred to as King of Laos though not formally acknowledged as such until 1946) became vassals of the colonial overlords. Paris hoped that they would become docile and useful collaborators. This did not always prove the case, especially in Vietnam.⁹

The Vietnamese Monarchy and French Colonialism

In the most Sinified country of Southeast Asia, the pre-colonial ruler of Vietnam held power nominally devolved from the emperor of China, who presented his official seal and left the Vietnamese potentate to rule autonomously in return for tribute. The Vietnamese sovereign within his own realm called himself emperor; for the Chinese he remained a king of lesser magnificence than the emperor in Beijing, a younger "son of heaven." Vietnam thus formed one of the tributary states on China's periphery, though historically relations between Hué and Beijing veered from warfare to uneasy alliance. Resistance to Chinese invasion forms a foundation trope in Vietnam's narrative of its history, notwithstanding acknowledgement of the cultural influence of the Middle Kingdom. Domestically, government in Vietnam rested on the primacy of the royal court and a bureaucracy of mandarins chosen, as in China, through competitive examinations. The dynasty in power when the French colonizers arrived was the Nguyen, whose first emperor, Gia Long, established dominance over rivals, partly with French aid, by 1802.¹⁰ The sovereign ruled from a "forbidden city" with pomp and pageantry inspired by the Chinese court, the performance of Confucian rites one of his most important duties. Primogeniture did not regulate succession to the throne; the emperor named his heir from among his sons (who often numbered in the dozens) or other relatives, or a royal family council made the choice after his death. This procedure gave rise to competition among would-be heirs and conspiratorial manoeuvres among members of the royal family, courtiers and mandarins.

⁸ The best introduction to French colonisation is Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley, 2009).

⁹ In order to dissuade any notion of national unity, the French refused to use the word Vietnam, maintaining that Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina were separate entities. They referred to the ruler in Hué initially as king, then as emperor of Annam.

¹⁰ French missionaries in Vietnam in the late 1700s promoted efforts by Nguyen Anh to obtain control over the country as emperor Gia Long. His immediate successors proved less favorable to French interests, one of the excuses for colonial intervention in the late 1800s.

French colonial proconsuls treated Vietnamese sovereigns with surface deference but worked steadily to undermine their power and the whole cultural system on which it rested. The French promulgated new law codes, took control of the country's financial system and bureaucracy, and eventually abolished mandarin examinations and appointments. French administrators and settlers gained commercial and economy sway, with Vietnamese peasants turned into poorly paid labourers for plantations and mines. The press and Western education, though schooling was parsimoniously provided, spread ideas of constitutionalism, nationalism, modernism and socialism throughout the emerging Europeanised elite, further undermining old allegiance to the dynasty. As Nguyen The Anh has shown, the French reduced the pre-colonial structure of governance to a shell, though not a completely hollow one.¹¹

In the mid-1800s Emperor Tu Duc (reigned 1847-1883) tried to keep the French at bay, his unwilling cession of the southern provinces and inability to counter French expansion northwards showing the challenges faced by the dynasty. Despite the lack of success in fending off the French, he retained much respect among his people. Tu Duc, unusually, fathered no children and his immediate successor (and nephew) reigned only three days before courtiers deposed him when he did not correctly perform the rites for his late father and because he allowed Christians to enter the inner sanctum of the imperial palace. The next emperor lasted for four months, and his successor ruled for less than a year, with rumours that courtiers poisoned one or both. In 1884, a more promising candidate ascended the throne, fourteen-year-old Ham Nghi.

At the outset of Ham Nghi's reign, the French made the final assault on northern Vietnam. In 1885, during a last-ditch effort to resist conquest, the emperor became implicated in a plot against the French led by one of the kingdom's regents, Ton That Thuyet. The conspirators spirited the emperor out of the royal palace, and retreated to the hill-country while warfare raged between the French and Vietnamese.¹² Gaining control of Hué, the French replaced Ham Nghi as emperor with his brother Dong Khanh; Ham Nghi, in hiding, created a small legitimist court. The French military eventually besieged Ham Nghi's redoubt, tipped off by a follower who betrayed him, and captured the emperor in 1888. The French decided not to execute the young man, now already deposed, or to place him on trial, no doubt not wishing to make him into a martyr. The French may have also wanted to keep him in reserve, a cautionary example to his successors of what could befall them if they resisted the colonizers, but also as a spare ruler who potentially could be returned to the throne if the situation warranted. So the French exiled Ham Nghi to Algeria, a safely distant location where they could be kept him under close control. Ham Nghi lived in relatively obscurity in exile for fifty-five years, dying in 1943. Meanwhile, Dong Khanh ruled for only three years, failing to win support from either his compatriots or the French.

In Vietnam, divisions had appeared between supporters of the old emperor and the new, and Ham Nghi's name inspired a continued current of resistance, the Can Vuong (Aid the Emperor) movement that persisted for several years but scored no success in overthrowing the French or bringing back Ham Nghi. The royalist movement nevertheless still proved able to attract followers in the early years of the twentieth century as the royalist Phan Boi Chau established a Reformation Society in 1903 and promoted a Travel East plan for young Vietnamese to study in Japan, considered a model of modernisation. Among them was Prince Cuong De, a direct descendant of Emperor Gia Long, who went to Tokyo in 1905. Under pressure from Paris, Tokyo expelled the Vietnamese in 1907, but allowed Cuong De to return five years later, and he remained in Japan for most of the next forty-six years. Cuong

¹¹ Nguyen The Anh, *op. cit.*

¹² The most comprehensive account remains Marcel Gauthier, *Le Roi proscrit* (Hanoi, 1940).

De, claiming that his ancestor, Gia Long's son, had been unfairly passed over for succession, staked a personal claim on the Vietnamese throne and rallied remaining royalist sentiment though without at the time any real chance of becoming emperor.¹³

Dong Khanh's successor as emperor, Thanh Thai, started out well from the French perspective in 1889, though after some years the French began to regard him as unbalanced. The emperor, they said, was given to vice and promiscuity, as well as acts of eccentricity. He made his concubines set up market stalls and play-act as vendors on the palace grounds, then began to play doctor and patient and, more alarmingly, surgeon and patient, with the women. In fact, intense personal conflicts between the emperor and the French Resident in Hué, a headstrong former *député* given his post after he lost an election, played a large role in the deterioration of the situation. Assessments differ about whether Thanh Thai's mental instability was real or feigned as a kind of passive resistance, and the French may have used the emperor's whims as grounds to undermine him, especially since he could become a potential centre of resistance. Finally, in 1907, the French forced Thanh Thai to abdicate, and dispatched him into internal exile in southern Vietnam.¹⁴

Thanh Thai's successor was one of his sons, the seven-year-old Duy Tan.¹⁵ He looked ideal for the colonizers, clever, French-speaking and watched over by French tutors. According to William J. Duiker, however, "rumours flew throughout the capital that ... the emperor Duy Tan was even more anti-French" than his father; his choice of a reign title, a Vietnamese word for "modernisation," signified "an act that seemed to proclaim his spiritual kinship with the Emperor Meiji in Japan."¹⁶ Duy Tan adapted well to his imperial responsibilities, carrying out the appropriate rites and, no doubt because of his tender age, keeping a low profile while the French continued to consolidate political and economic overlordship. The seemingly peaceful cohabitation of the Nguyen dynasty and the colonial government endured for less than a decade before another incident that revealed the residual power of the Vietnamese monarch and the difficulties faced by the French in manipulating the dynasty and making its head a docile subaltern.

In 1916, in part because of objection to efforts to recruit Vietnamese for the war effort, a rebellion against the French broke out, bringing together diverse secret organisations and ideologies. Duy Tan, now a mature seventeen-year-old, was implicated. The exact extent of his involvement remains unclear. A call to insurrection, written on 4 May, bore his seal, mentioned Thanh Thai and Ham Nghi and heralded Duy Tan's intention to "return freedom to our country." The conspirators, who had established contact with Duy Tan, moved the emperor out of palace on 5 May, but the French captured the rebels shortly afterwards. Medical doctors who examined Duy Tan, whose reports are quoted by Pierre Brocheux, diagnosed him as evidencing "the type of a moderate degenerate" with personal and genetic dispositions to abnormal behaviour; others suggested that he was undergoing an adolescent crisis. Brocheux rejects such views, arguing that Duy Tan acted from a real sense of duty. Years later, in 1936, Duy Tan (though in the context of seeking concessions from the French) pleaded that he had intervened in 1916 in order to avoid a bloodbath.¹⁷

¹³ Tran My-Van, *A Vietnamese Royal Exile in Japan: Prince Cuong De (1882-1951)* (London, 2005).

¹⁴ Nguyen The Anh, "L'Abdication de Thanh-Thai," *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* 64 (1977): 257-264.

¹⁵ Pierre Brocheux, "De l'Empereur Duy Tan au Prince Vinh San: L'Histoire peut-elle se répéter?" *Approches Asie* (1989-90): 1-25; E.-P. Thébault, "Le Tragique Destin d'un empereur d'Annam," *France-Asie* 200 (1970): 3-40; Nguyen Phuoc Bao Vang, ed., *Duy Tan, Empereur d'Annam 1900-1945 exilé à l'île de la Réunion, ou le destin tragique du prince Vinh San* (Sainte-Marie, La Réunion, 2001). The volume edited by Bao Vang, essentially a compilation of contemporary and later primary documents, has provided much of the source material for this paper.

¹⁶ William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York, 2000), 35.

¹⁷ See Brocheux, "De Duy Tan."

After overruling one administrator's proposal for Duy Tan's execution,¹⁸ French authorities exiled the ex-emperor to Reunion. For good measure, they also exiled to the French Indian Ocean colony Duy Tan's father, Thanh Thai, who had remained in confinement in southern Vietnam and who continued to show signs, in the French estimation, of mental instability and anti-French attitudes. Father and son, the two ex-emperors, remained estranged, both in Vietnam and in Reunion. Thanh Thai lived in obscurity, allowed to return to Vietnam in 1945 but kept under house arrest; he died in Saigon in 1954.

For David Marr, the 1916 insurrection constituted "the last strictly monarchist anti-colonial effort deserving of any mention."¹⁹ He emphasises the symbolic role played by the emperor: a young monarch who, in taking part in the insurrection, "had made a small but spiritually significant gesture.... It gave villagers some sense of continuing perspective and moral sustenance toward the day when all wrongs could be righted." Marr observes that if Duy Tan's exile showed how completely the French had mastered the court, it also demonstrated that an emperor could still exercise influence over his compatriots and serve as a focal point and actor in a rebellion. Although nationalists would move away from loyalty to the imperial throne in the 1920s, partly because of the failure of the emperors to eject the foreigners, the dynasty commanded residual respect. The reformist (and republican) Phan Chau Trinh could still regret in 1925 that monarchy remained the preferred form of government for the "learned circle" in Vietnam, and that

so far as people in rural areas are concerned, they know nothing about democracy; they worship the king in their heads as if he were a deity or a sage. Not only do they dare not think about the question of "whether or not we should have a king," but they act as if a person raising this question would be struck by a thunderbolt, buried under rocks, trampled by elephants, and torn apart by horses.²⁰

The year of that statement also marked the death of Duy Tan's successor, Khai Dinh, whose close collaboration with the French evoked criticism from Phan Chau Trinh and other nationalists. The new emperor in 1925, the last of the Nguyen dynasty, was Bao Dai.²¹ Having spent his early life in France, and with a clear preference for continuing to do so, and with a reputation as a playboy, Bao Dai did not assume an energetic role over the twenty years that he reigned; like Khai Dinh, he acquiesced quietly to French instructions. In 1925, as well, the French arrested Phan Boi Chau, founder of the Restoration Society (but who now preferred Sun Yat-sen's republicanism as a model for Vietnam nationalism); he was brought back from his refuge in Shanghai, convicted and spent the rest of his life under house arrest. The middle-of-the-road Phan Chau Tinh died in 1926. More radical nationalists now organised resistance, including those in the Marxist vanguard that coalesced in 1930 into the Indochinese Communist Party.

The Once and Future Emperor?

Meanwhile, Duy Tan, allowed to use his birth name and title of Prince Vinh San, lived on in Reunion. He contracted several amorous liaisons with local women after his wife returned to

¹⁸ The Résident Supérieur in Annam wanted Duy Tan executed, but the (Vietnamese) Minister of Public Instruction (with whose daughter Duy Tan was in love) persuaded the privy council to recommend his deposition. The leader of the revolt, before his own execution, also pleaded for the emperor's life. See Nguyen The Anh, *Monarchie*, 72-73.

¹⁹ Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, 233.

²⁰ Phan Chau Trinh, "Monarchy and Democracy," in *Phan Chau Trinh and His Political Writings* (Ithaca, NY, 2009), 136-137.

²¹ For his personal account, Bao Dai, *Le Dragon d'Annam* (Paris, 1980).

Vietnam because of ill health and fathered ten children. He contributed a few well-received essays and poems to a local literary periodical. He practiced archery, tennis and other sports, occasionally earning pocket money to supplement his French allowance by working as a jockey. He played the violin and joined a Masonic lodge. He became passionately interested in radios and operated a radio repair shop. He seems to have had few contacts with other Vietnamese.

The ex-emperor did not regularly participate in political life, though he supported the Popular Front in the 1930s. One photo shows him giving a speech under the hammer-and-sickle banner, though there exists no evidence of his being a Communist Party member. In an unpublished 1936 letter to the Communist newspaper *L'Humanité*, he stated, "Annam claims the right to be an independent and neutral nation in the same way as a European nation."²² When a visiting South African asked Duy Tan whether he would like to return home, he picked up his violin and played "J'ai deux amours" – the song popularised by Josephine Baker singing of her two loves, "*mon pays et Paris*," and tearfully questioned, "Why can't I return to Annam?... Surely I need not go on rotting on this little island, where there are no interests for me... Why can't they send me home?"²³ In 1922 he had petitioned the French for naturalisation, but received a negative response. On several occasions, he requested permission to live in France, with the requests either denied or unanswered, suggesting that authorities feared that his presence in the *métropole* could prove awkward, especially with rising anti-colonialist sentiment among Vietnamese and their supporters.

The political situation was changing dramatically in Asia in the 1930s, especially with Japanese incursions into Manchuria in 1931; the following year, Japan created the state of Manchukuo, installing Pu Yi, the last emperor of China (deposed in 1912), as ruler. The move heartened Prince Cuong De in Tokyo, with hopes that his Japanese patrons might appoint him the ruler of Vietnam if they moved into Southeast Asia. War in Europe at the end of the decade more immediately than in Asia raised questions about Indochina. After the German victory over France, the colonial government in Hanoi pledged allegiance to Marshal Pétain and also eventually collaborated with Tokyo, acceding to ever more stringent Japanese demands to station troops in Indochina and exploit its raw materials. Japan worked easily enough with the Vichy Governor-General, Admiral Decoux, with Bao Dai pushed to the background.²⁴ Disappointingly for the exiled prince and would-be emperor Cuong De, Tokyo had no need for an alternative to the sitting emperor.

Back in Reunion, with the French defeat in 1940, Duy Tan cast his lots with the Free French. His radio shop provided a gathering-place for those seeking information about the war, though listening to foreign broadcasts was illegal in the Vichy-controlled island, and he was briefly detained early in 1942. When Gaullist forces took over Reunion in late 1942, Duy Tan asked to join the Free French in London, but the request was turned down, according to Brocheux, because security services considered him either a Communist or a hard-line socialist. Duy Tan was allowed to enlist in the French navy but served only briefly because of a propensity to sea-sickness. A senior officer, General Boissieu, reported back to de Gaulle favourably about Duy Tan's *ralliement* and good service, and he was allowed to transfer to the army. The authorities then sent him to Madagascar with the hope that he would quell rising discontent among Vietnamese soldiers whose repatriation to Indochina after the fall of France had been long delayed because of the suspension of shipping links between Madagascar and Vietnam. Duy Tan acquitted himself of the task, and de Gaulle called him to France in 1945, where he arrived after Germany's capitulation. Duy Tan soon

²² Quoted in Brocheux, "Duy Tan," *op. cit.*

²³ Julian Mockford, *Pursuit of an Island* (London, 1950), 52.

²⁴ See Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War, 1940-45* (Manchester, 1998); and Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics* (Stanford, 2001).

had a short posting with French occupation forces in Germany; the ex-emperor, hoping his battalion would be transferred to Vietnam, gave several talks on Indochina to the soldiers. The battalion's move did not eventuate, and superiors soon recalled Duy Tan to Paris. There he made contacts with other Vietnamese but, says Brocheux, sparked little interest among his compatriots in the diaspora.²⁵

Vietnam was now in a state of chaos.²⁶ The Japanese had occupied the country in March 1945 and established full control over a nominally independent Vietnam under Bao Dai. The Japanese surrendered on 15 August, and on 2 September, the Communist leader Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Bao Dai abdicated, relinquishing his imperial seal to Ho, becoming a simple citizen and Supreme Counsellor of the new government; Ho dispatched him on a mission to Hong Kong, which meant virtual exile. Meanwhile, Chinese forces had moved into the north of Vietnam and American forces into the south. The French, for their part, aimed to re-establish their authority and, ideally, the colonial *status quo ante bellum*, though hesitating between recognising Ho's government and fighting it. How could France restore its authority and assure colonial control? De Gaulle had a plan. This is how he put it in his memoirs:

To whatever ends might be useful, I nourished a secret design. It was to give to the former emperor Duy Tan the means to reappear, if his successor and relative Bao Dai showed himself definitively to be overcome by events. Duy Tan, deposed in 1916 by French authority, become once again Prince Vinh San and transferred to Reunion, had nevertheless through the course of this war determined to serve in our army. He held the rank of *commandant*. Some thirty years of exile had not effaced in the soul of the Annamese people the memory of this sovereign. On 14 December [1945], I received him to see, man to man, what we might accomplish together.²⁷

Duy Tan – who had not formally abdicated when exiled in 1916 – could be restored. De Gaulle no doubt felt confident that he would prove a malleable vassal and, as David Marr has remarked, “that the prince was completely out of touch with events in his homeland must have been considered an asset by de Gaulle.”²⁸ De Gaulle and Duy Tan would go together to Vietnam in early 1946, and Duy Tan would replace the compromised Bao Dai on the restored throne. Such was the apparent plan when Duy Tan set off from Paris to visit his family in Reunion in late December. En route, his plane crashed in central Africa, with all of the passengers killed. De Gaulle remarked that France decidedly did not have good luck.

Not all, in fact, had supported de Gaulle's initiative. De Gaulle's High Commissioner in Indochina, Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu, echoed the general's positive sentiments about Duy Tan and the restoration, but officials at the Colonial Ministry sounded dubious about both Duy Tan's personal capacity to live up to de Gaulle's expectations and the likelihood of a returned royal rallying the Vietnamese around the French flag. Some expressed concern about Duy Tan's demands for unification of the three *ky* (which Paris had always adamantly opposed) and possible expectations of full and real independence.²⁹

²⁵ Brocheux, “Duy Tan,” *op. cit.*

²⁶ See Martin Shipway, *The Road to War: France and Vietnam, 1944-1947* (Oxford, 1996); and Stein Tønnessen, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley, 2010).

²⁷ Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de guerre*, Vol. III (Paris, 1959), 230.

²⁸ David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley, 1995), 547.

²⁹ For the views of various actors, see Frédéric Turpin, *De Gaulle, les gaullistes et l'Indochine, 1940-1956* (Paris, 2005), 190-194; Pierre Journoud, *De Gaulle et le Vietnam (1945-1969)* (Paris, 2011), 31; and *Le Général de Gaulle et l'Indochine, 1940-1946. Colloque tenu par l'Institut Charles-de-Gaulle, les 20 et 21 février 1981; établis par Gilbert Pilleul* (Paris, 1982), esp. 199-201.

Whether Duy Tan could have regained the throne, whether the Vietnamese (especially the Communists) would have accommodated him, and whether his reign might have resulted in a different outcome than the war that soon began in Vietnam is a matter of conjecture. It remains unlikely that he could have done so but nevertheless interesting that the French, or at least de Gaulle and his associates, set enough store by the monarchy, even in the form into which the French had devalorised it, and also thought highly enough of the former rebel rallied to the French, that they were willing to play that card.

De Gaulle resigned in early 1946, leaving others to address the question of Indochina. Late that year, armed hostilities broke out between France and the Communist-dominated nationalists. France meanwhile adopted a new constitution for the Fourth Republic and, determined to re-establish and maintain imperial power, established the Union Française, a federation of overseas territories and associated states (*états associés*) that, though notionally autonomous, effectively remained entirely under French mastery. The French brought back Bao Dai as nominal Head of State of Vietnam, without his imperial title, in 1949, accepted the unification of the *ky*, and recognised the *états associés* of Vietnam, as well as Cambodia under King Sihanouk, and Laos under King Sisavang Vong. Within five years of Bao Dai's return, however, France's dominion in Indochina came to an end. The Nguyen dynasty did not survive.

Ham Nghi had died in obscurity in 1943, Duy Tan perished in the air crash of 1945, and Thanh Thai, allowed to return to Vietnam, remained under surveillance until his death in 1954. Cuong De lived on until 1951, never abandoning hope of gaining the Vietnamese throne, though his burst of optimism in the late 1930s soon evaporated. Bao Dai remained head of the non-Communist Republic of Vietnam until 1955, when he was overturned in a coup led by Ngo Dinh Diem. He lived the rest of his life in France, where he died in 1997. One of his grandsons, resident in France, is the current claimant to the Vietnamese throne.

Thanh Thai was entombed near his imperial forebears in Hué, and Ham Nghi laid to rest in his French wife's native village in the Dordogne. Duy Tan's grave was in central Africa, where his plane crashed. In 1987, at the request of his family, his ashes were disinterred and, via Paris and a ceremony at a Buddhist temple, were flown to Vietnam, and, under the aegis of the Vietnamese authorities, interred in Hué. Ham Nghi because of his resistance to the French is a hero for the Vietnamese, and, because of his *ralliement* to the Free French, enters into the French pantheon as well. The Vietnamese asked that the remains of Ham Nghi be repatriated, for he too is seen as a hero, but his family has declined.³⁰

Banishment and Colonial Rule

The biographies of Ham Nghi, Thanh Thai and Duy Tan (as well as Emperor Bao Dai and Prince Cuong De) offer examples of trans-national personal itineraries under colonial rule, the drama of power and its loss, resistance and defeat, banishment and the hope of possible return. They leave poignant Napoleonic-like images: one exiled emperor, still clad in a silk Vietnamese robe, resting in his sitting room in Algeria, another fiddling with his radio amidst the luxuriant vegetation of an Indian Ocean island, his father in his own world near-by. They also present the picture of men exiled for resistance to French colonial rule (though with other considerations for Thanh Thai), with no due process, no trial, no right of appeal, aging figures kept under detention and surveillance by the French, yet potentially waiting to assume a new role in national life.

³⁰ Traditional Marxist historians in Vietnam honoured the three exiled emperors for their anti-colonial stances; since the mid-1980s, historians there have been revising opinions of the Nguyen dynasty, previously condemned for feudalism, fanatical Confucianism and failure to ward off the colonisers. See Bruce Lockhart, "Re-assessing the Nguyen Dynasty," *Crossroads*, 15:1 (2001): 9-53.

The history of the Vietnamese monarchy in the late 1800s and early 1900s provides a reminder of the general roles and fates of East Asian sovereigns who attempted to resist foreign incursion, with greater or lesser success. Several served as prime movers for modernisation, as occurred with the Meiji emperor in Japan and Kings Mongkut and Chualongkorn in Siam – though those dynasts, too, met with changes, with forced transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy in Siam in 1932, and Emperor Hirohito's renunciation of divine status in 1945. In China, revolution brought down the Qing dynasty, temporarily resurrected in Manchukuo. Some dynasties survived, though in reduced circumstances, under colonial rule, as in the French protectorates, the princely states of India, the Shan states of Burma, and the Malay sultanates.³¹

In their new dominions, colonizers backed by the force of arms faced a choice between maintaining an indigenous dynasty or disestablishing it and hoping to find collaborators elsewhere. Patrice Morlat explains the dilemma with reference to the French: "To seek support and collaboration from the court and the mandarins or to push them aside in order to create a new native elite formed in French schools, speaking French, rejecting their Chinese and Confucian culture and marching along the path indicated by the French colonial power? That was the question!"³² The British abolished the monarchy in Burma in 1885, as did the Japanese in Korea in 1910. The Dutch overlaid the sultanates of Indonesia with their own administration, as did the British in the Malay and Shan states, but did not abolish the hereditary rulerships. The French also kept the dynasties, but in Vietnam they did not always find the loyal vassals for whom they searched either in the traditional or the new elites.

From the start of colonisation through the bitter end in Vietnam, the French tried to manipulate and mould the royal house to fit their purposes. They occasionally found a willing partner in the monarch, but the lack of long-term success testifies to the inherent paradoxes of colonial authorities trying to transform an institution that once served as the fulcrum of national identity into one that could, at the same time, be obsequious to the French and retain the potency to engender support and respect in the population.

Especially at dangerous moments, the French found it opportune to dispense with an inconvenient monarch. They banished Ham Nghi at the outset of their rule in Annam and Tonkin, years when they also faced rebellion in Cambodia. They suppressed the Khmer insurrection (in which several royal princes took part), using it to tighten domination over the protectorate by exacting greater concessions from the monarch. If the King Norodom had not agreed to the new 1884 convention that conceded much increased power to the French, he might well have suffered the same fate as Ham Nghi. The exile of Thanh Thai in 1907 followed closely on a peaceful succession to the throne of Luang Prabang but a more contested one in Cambodia, both in 1904 – the heir apparent in Phnom Penh, Prince Yukanthor, who had publicly remonstrated the colonizers, was passed over for the crown. These years likewise saw the emergence of the Restoration Society, the Travel East movement and growth of nationalism in Vietnam. Even if Thanh Thai had not explicitly challenged the French, an eccentric monarch on the throne caused concern. Then Duy Tan's exile occurred during the First World War, a time of revolts and riots throughout the French empire. France faced not only the challenge from Duy Tan in Vietnam and the rebel prince Cuong De in exile, but also from two Cambodian princes, Mayura (whom they exiled to Vietnam) and Yukanthor (in self-imposed exile in Thailand), who had sent out feelers to the Germans. Exile was a practical tactic *in extremis*, propitiously used to rid a protectorate of a king or prince without making him into an imprisoned or executed martyr.

³¹ See Roger Kershaw, *Monarchy in South-East Asia: The Faces of Tradition in Transition* (London, 2001); and Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (Honolulu, 2002).

³² Patrice Morlat, *Indochine années vingt: Le Rendez-vous manqué (1918-1928)* (Paris, 2006), 278.

Forced or self-chosen exile was not reserved for royal personages; Ho Chi Minh, among other nationalists, spent years in exile, the object of French surveillance and harassment. The colonizers sent many Vietnamese dissidents into internal exile, especially on Poulo Condore (Con Son) island, where soon after the takeover of Cochinchina, France established a penitentiary; ironically, as Peter Zinoman has shown, confinement there and in other prisons facilitated politicisation of prisoners and the establishment of revolutionary networks and Communist cells.³³ Convicts shipped to the South Pacific territory of New Caledonia in the late 1800s, it would seem, included some political prisoners.³⁴ From 1885 to 1922, the French transported almost one thousand Vietnamese convicts – some of them definitely political prisoners – to Guiana. In 1931, for instance, France shipped a convoy of 353 rebels from Vietnam to the Inini, the hinterland of their South American colony.³⁵

Thanh Thai and Duy Tan, in fact, were not the first Vietnamese political prisoners sent to Reunion. With the abolition of slavery in 1848, planters desperately needed a supply of labour, especially when the British stopped French recruitment of indentured labourers in India. In the early 1860s, a Reunionnais planter journeyed to the recently conquered Cochinchina to seek workers. From 1863 to 1868, 1287 Vietnamese convicts arrived in Réunion, accepting indenture for five or six years in lieu of incarceration. Two-thirds of the indentured Vietnamese were political prisoners, convicted for opposition to French takeover of Cochinchina.³⁶

Ham Nghi in Algeria, and Thanh Thai and Duy Tan in Reunion (as well as Cuong De in Japan), are special cases of exile. The three represent the banishment of reigning sovereigns and, in the case of Duy Tan (and possibly Ham Nghi), one who hoped to regain a throne; Cuong De nursed hopes of becoming emperor through the good offices of either the French or the Japanese. The idea of imperial return was not so fanciful as it might first appear: the French could have restored a Ham Nghi reconciled with French rule in 1907 or 1916, the Japanese might have turned Cuong De into the Pu Yi of Annam, and Duy Tan left Paris in December 1945 thinking that he would indeed return to Hué; the French brought ex-emperor Bao Dai back as Head of State of the *état associé* of Vietnam in 1949. In the event, however, there was no imperial restoration of the ex-emperors. The fate of the Nguyen exiles, and the dynastic line they represented, turned out to be no better, in the long term, than that of the Bourbons, the Bonapartes and the Orleanist royals.

³³ Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* (Berkeley, 2001).

³⁴ Christiane Bougerol, "Chronique d'une crise coloniale et son contexte: Les Vietnamiens de Nouvelle-Calédonie (1945-1964)," *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 110 (2000-2001): 83-95.

³⁵ Danielle Donet-Vincent, "Les Bagnes des Indochinois en Guyane," *Outre-Mers* 330-331 (2001): 209-221.

³⁶ Daniel Varga, "Les Vietnamiens à La Réunion, de la déportation à l'émigration volontaire (1859-1910)," *Outre-Mers* 374-375 (2012): 233-274.