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# “Cet ignoble trafic”: The Kidnapping and Sale of Vietnamese Women and Children in French Colonial Indochina, 1873–1935

MICHELINE LESSARD

*Le trafic des femmes et des enfants au Viêt Nam représente un fléau qui n'est ni récent, ni contemporain. Pendant la période coloniale française (1858–1954) l'administration coloniale, les consuls de France en Chine, les militaires et d'autres colons se rendirent compte que les rapt de femmes et de fillettes vietnamiennes étaient non seulement fréquents mais faisaient aussi souvent partie de réseaux criminels bien organisés. De nombreuses bandes armées sillonnant les régions côtières et les villages frontaliers entre la Chine et le Viêt Nam capturaient ou enlevaient des femmes et des enfants vietnamiens afin de les vendre dans de nombreux marchés chinois. Ces femmes et enfants, destinés au concubinage, au travail domestique ou à la prostitution, parfois permirent à des bandes vietnamiennes anticoloniales de les échanger contre des armes. Malgré de nombreuses mesures mises en place pour mettre fin à ce trafic, le commerce des femmes et des enfants vietnamiens demeura constant pendant la période coloniale française et devint un phénomène embarrassant pour les autorités coloniales.*

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In December 2002, a news service out of New Delhi reported on the current practice of kidnapping Vietnamese women to be sold in China. One of its articles recounted the story of Pei Xing Fu, a Chinese man arrested for drug trafficking who also confessed to having kidnapped a Vietnamese woman in broad daylight.<sup>1</sup> In Ban'ai village, where Pei Xing Fu resides, it was reported that seven men had been sentenced for trafficking Vietnamese women across the border into China.<sup>2</sup> Another man, Zhang Yuanfu, claimed he had first been married to a Vietnamese wife for whom he had paid about 500 Yuan (about US\$60) to the go-between. Now married to a Chinese woman, Zhang seemed nostalgic about his Vietnamese wife, who, he claimed, had been "more considerate and hard working" than his current Chinese wife.<sup>3</sup> As for Pei Xing Fu, he estimated that around 30 to 40 percent of the men in his village had Vietnamese brides.<sup>4</sup>

Such instances of human trafficking from Vietnam into China have increased with the resumption of diplomatic and economic ties between Beijing and Hanoi in 1989. The subsequent increase in trade has made the nearly 2,300 kilometers of land border between both countries busier and more porous, therefore more difficult to monitor. In addition, there are at least 15 ports bordering Guangxi (where most trafficked Vietnamese women end up) and Vietnam, as well as two major rail links and ten roads.<sup>5</sup> So far, this normalization of trade between China and Vietnam has tended to favor the Chinese economy.<sup>6</sup> Persistent poverty in rural Vietnam has therefore motivated some Vietnamese women to seek better opportunities in China. A number of them are tricked into China with promises of better paying jobs or marriage, while others, working in the border areas, are quite literally grabbed and kidnapped. Chinese traffickers, sometimes aided by Vietnamese intermediaries who can overcome the language barriers, prey on the economic vulnerabilities of the young women, and sometimes children, as well as on their gullibility and openness. More often than not, Vietnamese women and girls are forcibly sold as brides for Chinese men. In most instances, however, these women are not legally married and therefore have neither rights nor privileges that benefit such unions. Others, even less fortunate, are sold into prostitution rings, where they are often stripped of their identity papers and held against their will.

It is equally important to note that the flow of traffic is not limited to mainland China. Human trafficking rings between Vietnam and Taiwan are particularly active, as are networks between Vietnam and Malaysia, and Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>7</sup> Quite recently, in July 2007, a Ho Chi Minh City tribunal

sentenced several people on charges of human trafficking. A Vietnamese woman by the name of Tran Thi My Phuong was condemned to 12 years in prison, while her Taiwanese husband, Tsai I Hsien, received a seven-year sentence.<sup>8</sup> The couple and their accomplices were found guilty of having trafficked 126 women to Malaysia during a two-year period (2005 to 2007).<sup>9</sup> The presiding judge, Tran Thi Hong Viet, claimed that the young Vietnamese women had been led to believe they would find husbands in Malaysia. The women were, however, each sold to brokers for about \$1,500 to \$2,000. The brokers later sold them to various Malay bars and "houses" for as high as \$6,300 each.<sup>10</sup> Malay authorities had been alerted to the problem when ten of the Vietnamese women in question managed to escape the places in which they had been held against their wishes.

The Vietnamese government has taken this problem very seriously and has set in place a number of collaborative programs with China in order to curtail this traffic. Realizing that globalization has created conditions that have made this trade more difficult to control, the Vietnam Women's Union has also resorted to preventive measures. Since January of 2007, the Vietnam Women's Union, with the help of funding from Finland, has set up, in sensitive areas, associations whose purpose is to provide education and awareness concerning human trafficking.<sup>11</sup> In August 2007, it also organized contests to reward Vietnamese who were most effective in communicating to others not only the dangers of human trafficking, but also the means used to trick women and children into these illegal networks (e-mail chat rooms, marriage brokers and agencies, labor recruitment agencies, and so on).<sup>12</sup> The Chinese government has also taken measures to demonstrate its desire to end this trade. According to researchers, between 2001 and 2003, the Chinese police had succeeded in solving more than 20,000 cases of "trafficking in women and children, arrested 20,028 traffickers and freed 42,215 kidnapped women and children."<sup>13</sup>

Although the current research on human trafficking between Vietnam and China focuses almost exclusively on the present situation, thorough archival research clearly demonstrates that this contemporary form of human trafficking is not new to the border areas between China and Vietnam, that instances of kidnappings of Vietnamese women and children for sale in China existed prior to the establishment of French Indochina in 1885. In fact, much like contemporary forms of human trafficking, in nineteenth-century Vietnam, the sale of women and children was clearly linked to drug trafficking, specifically that of opium. In

a more general work on smuggling in Southeast Asia, historian Eric Tagliacozzo points out that “one of the most important subsets of people smuggled into and around Southeast Asia at the turn of the century were women to be used for sexual purposes,” and that “by the early 1880s . . . reports already singled out Annam [Vietnam] and Siam as source countries with the purchasers of these women being Singapore Arabs or Chinese.”<sup>14</sup> For his part, scholar Nguyen Van Phong argues that although missionary accounts reveal that Portuguese merchants were known to have engaged sporadically in the trafficking of Japanese women as early as the sixteenth century, Vietnamese women had largely escaped this phenomenon until around 1865.<sup>15</sup> He further suggests that Vietnamese women and girls had until then avoided being trafficked because the cultural practice of blackening their teeth with betel had rendered them unattractive to potential buyers.<sup>16</sup> Over time, however, Vietnamese women developed a reputation for being hardworking, quiet, and docile, making them attractive as potential concubines.<sup>17</sup> While evidence suggests that the problem existed prior to 1885, it is safe to say that the scale of this illicit trade increased exponentially during the first 50 years of French colonial rule in Vietnam (1885–1935). In fact, embarrassed by their inability to stop this trade, French colonial officials would often repeat that it had existed throughout Vietnamese history, and that it was particularly difficult to stop because it was grounded in a number of cultural beliefs. These perceptions were reinforced by some French scholars who viewed askance a number of Vietnamese practices. In 1903, for example, Fernand Malot wrote a doctoral thesis in which he stated that Vietnamese husbands “purchased” their wives through gifts his family would give to the bride’s family.<sup>18</sup> This erroneous interpretation suggested that the practice of “selling” Vietnamese women was embedded in Vietnamese customs.

Such were also the impressions of French physician Dr. Hocquard as he accompanied French troops throughout Tonkin. His memoirs mention what he interpreted as the common practice of “buying and selling children.”<sup>19</sup> Hocquard specified that this sort of exchange was rarely for the purpose of enslaving a child, but rather to provide the child a better future by allowing him or her to be adopted into a wealthier family.<sup>20</sup> While the perceptions of men such as Malot and Hocquard were gendered in nature and sometimes demonstrated a lack of understanding of Vietnamese culture, they also failed to make distinctions between certain cultural practices and crimes of kidnapping and human trafficking.

For their part, Vietnamese scholars point out that until 1885, instances of human trafficking were few and far between. In the foreword of a report published by the Youth Research Institute in Hanoi and compiled by Dr. Le Thi Quy, Dr. Dang Cang Khanh stated that:

Tracing back the history we can see that many years ago, trafficking in women was not a serious social problem in Vietnam. In a feudal society when Confucianism was the leading ideology, the women only focused on the affairs of their family and their family line. The women did not participate in social activities so they were not be able [*sic*] to move out of the social control of their family, their family line and community. In that society there was no needs [*sic*] for a trafficking in women market. Trafficking in women was a rare phenomenon which took place sneakingly [*sic*] and was often condemned sharply.<sup>21</sup>

If contemporary Vietnamese scholars maintain that Confucianism might have been a bulwark against the trafficking of women and children, French colonial officials argued, at times, that Confucianism actually contributed to this form of traffic—that Confucian patriarchy, combined with extreme poverty, pushed Vietnamese families to sell their daughters on the Chinese market either as domestics or as concubines.<sup>22</sup> In addition, in poor rural families “blessed” with numerous sons, young boys were sometimes sold to adoptive families themselves unable to conceive a son. Such practices were indeed not uncommon in precolonial Vietnam, but they were generally carefully regulated,<sup>23</sup> and were very different from what later became endemic during the French colonial period: the outright theft and sale of Vietnamese women and children, conducted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for the most part, by armed bands. There existed also, in this time period, the practice of “tricking” Vietnamese women or girls into making their way across the Chinese border, often under the pretext that they could sell their goods at better prices in the Chinese markets. Once there, these young Vietnamese women were held captive and later sold. In general, this type of smuggling required Vietnamese intermediaries, usually women, who would be likely to gain the young women’s trust and confidence. Furthermore, such methods were not limited to the border areas. In a history of Hanoi, Hoang Dao Thuy mentions the fear generated by the *me min* (literally, women kidnappers) who sometimes managed to trick Vietnamese girls or women to follow them through offers of sweets or areca nuts. The girls would

ultimately disappear as they were, more often than not, spirited out of Hanoi and transported to China.<sup>24</sup> Over time, because this proved to be a highly lucrative trade, a more sophisticated network of human trafficking evolved.

This essay argues that this form of human trafficking existed prior to the establishment of French rule in Vietnam in 1885, that by the mid-1870s marketplaces already existed where Vietnamese women and children were sold or bartered. In addition, the archival documents examined so far indicate that this trade increased significantly between 1885 and 1935, and that French colonial rule in Vietnam actually created circumstances that often abetted various forms of smuggling. As research on contemporary forms of human trafficking suggests, “The trafficking in people goes hand in hand with a number of other social changes.”<sup>25</sup> In French colonial Vietnam, the scope of the trade was such that numerous French colonial authorities were powerless to stem the tide of this illicit commerce. Although the French colonial government often took measures to stem what it referred to as *cet ignoble trafic*, the *mise en valeur* of French Indochina provided traffickers with new means of communications through which they could transport their human cargo. The economic development of Indochina required the elaboration of a communications system that would facilitate trade not only with Europe but with other Asian markets, and with China in particular. To this end, the French colonial government built roads, created port cities, and quickly developed rail lines linking Vietnam to China. Such an infrastructure necessarily increased the speed and the ease with which merchandise could be expedited. In addition, an export agricultural system was set in place, requiring significant manpower. This need for laborers considerably increased the level of migration along the northern border areas of Vietnam. Also, an increase in banditry and in the smuggling of arms, opium, and human beings paralleled the increase in the volume of trade brought about by French colonial rule in Vietnam. The French colonial economic policies of state monopolies on salt, alcohol, and opium also encouraged clandestine networks of trade as well as black-market activities.

In the years following the first French military campaign in Vietnam in 1858, the French military, and later the French colonial administration, faced numerous challenges. First, Vietnamese resistance to French domination had begun immediately after the first battles around Danang in 1858. Once a number of provinces in southern Vietnam were ceded to France in 1862, the Vietnamese “scholars’ resistance” began. Many Vietnamese scholars (and administrators)

headed north, while others retreated to their native villages, resisting colonial rule by refusing to collaborate with French authorities or with the Imperial Court in Hué. Some scholars, like Truong Dinh and Phan Dinh Phung, took up arms in attempts to regain lost territory or to prevent the loss of more Vietnamese provinces.

Once in Tonkin (northern Vietnam), French troops and the colonial administration had to contend with the presence of countless Chinese and Vietnamese armed bands. Some carried the banners of Chinese secret societies, such as the Black Flags, and others were specifically Vietnamese anticolonial rebels. Often, these bands worked with one another or exchanged goods in order to meet their specific goals. There were also groups of bandits who traveled along the border areas in search of goods of all kinds that could later be sold. A great number of these bands also traveled in junks or in sampans along the coastal and river areas of both countries. While trying to maintain order and fighting all of these groups, French troops discovered that a number of them were involved in the *traite des femmes*, the kidnapping and sale of Vietnamese women and children who were later sold in China as domestic servants, concubines, or even prostitutes. For the most part, their victims were poor, uneducated, often illiterate women and children whose voices may forever remain unheard. However, some archival documents, such as interrogations of those who managed to escape their captors or keepers, or accounts of police officers and soldiers who rescued them, offer at least a glimpse into their lives.

In his 1993 study entitled *The Chinese Community in Vietnam under the French*, Alain G. Marsot claims that "the carrying off of Tongkinese women began around the 1870s and rapidly increased."<sup>26</sup> As early as 1873, French Catholic missionaries in Tonkin reported that Vietnamese women and children were frequently being kidnapped. In his annual report, Monseigneur Gauthier complained that the coast of Tonkin had become a dangerous area where "pirates" went inland from their ships in order to "pillage and burn villages" and "often to kidnap women and children."<sup>27</sup> In his annual report of 1875, Bishop Zéphirin Guillemin mentioned that one of his fellow missionaries, Father Jean-Marie Delavay, had managed to raise enough funds to allow the repatriation of a number of kidnapped Vietnamese women.<sup>28</sup> In another report that year, Tonkin bishop Monseigneur Gauthier claimed that Delavay's efforts had resulted in the repatriation of 19 "malheureuses victimes."<sup>29</sup> Reporting on the situation in Hai Nan and Guangdong in 1875, Monseigneur Guillemin further pointed out



that Delavay was trying to help a significant number of Vietnamese women, who were now married to Chinese men and could not yet safely be sent back to their native villages.<sup>30</sup> Three years later, in 1878, Monseigneur Guillemain thanked the generous souls who had given money and therefore allowed Father Delavay to, once again, purchase a number of Vietnamese women who had been kidnapped and sold in China, and return them to their native villages. In his report, Father Guillemain stated that as a result, 35 children had been bought back and returned to Vietnam.<sup>31</sup> The problem seems to have been fairly constant, for in the biographical notice published by the Société des missions étrangères de Paris, Father Delavay is remembered especially for his constant efforts to raise funds in order to repurchase kidnapped Vietnamese women and children.<sup>32</sup> In addition to Father Delavay, another missionary, Father Emile-Alphonse Mioux, is noted for having done everything in his power to contribute to the “suppression of the trade of *annamite* women.”<sup>33</sup> In 1885, Monseigneur Puginier wrote that, fearing an imminent attack, some “*annamite*”<sup>34</sup> women and children had sought refuge in Son Tay and in Hanoi, and that those who hailed from the same villages in western Tonkin and had chosen to stay behind had been captured by the Black Flags.<sup>35</sup> In 1888 Monseigneur Pineau reported that in the area of Nghe An, French troops had successfully destroyed two “pirate” strongholds and had, in the process, freed 23 Vietnamese men and women who had been held captive for two years.<sup>36</sup> Such incidents may simply have been the tip of the iceberg, for it should be pointed out that Father Delavay and his Catholic colleagues concentrated their efforts on the women and children who had been stolen from the villages in which there was a Catholic presence. The women and children Delavay repatriated were mostly Catholic converts. By all accounts, however, the incursion of armed bands was not limited to Catholic villages.

The existence of human trafficking in Vietnam in the late nineteenth century was also reported by numerous travelers to the areas bordering China. For example, N. Hardouin, writing under the pseudonym of Dick de Lonlay, published a book in Paris in 1886 in which he recounted his travels throughout Tonkin. He wrote of having witnessed the capture of a Chinese junk in which 70 Vietnamese, 25 women, and 45 children had been hidden. These women and children, he reported, had been kidnapped in the area of Nam Dinh and were on their way to Pak Hoi, to be sold on the “grand marché chinois” of that town.<sup>37</sup> In 1898 Louis de Grandmaison wrote that of all the activities of the pirates, the

"most developed was certainly that of the export of women."<sup>38</sup> Grandmaison further stated that *annamite* women were very much in demand "sur les marchés chinois," and that many of them actually fared better in China than in their native villages. He also mentioned the existence of Chinese clandestine agencies scattered throughout Tonkin that actively recruited Vietnamese women. These agencies were also part of a fairly well-organized network since they were also linked to inns and hotels along the routes used to transport the women to China.<sup>39</sup> In the memoirs recounting his "pacification" campaigns in Tonkin, French captain Joseph Galliéni wrote extensively about *les bandes* that roamed the border areas, taking with them "buffalo, rice, opium, money, and women."<sup>40</sup> He also mentioned that he had witnessed the French military in Tonkin and in China having to provide protection to many women and children who had been the victims of these Chinese bands.<sup>41</sup>

In 1885, James George Scott, also writing on the French "pacification" campaigns, reported that in the village of Mong Cay:

Every hundred yards or so one comes across extensive go-downs where are stored up goods stolen and carried off from all parts of the Gulf—balls of opium, bales of silk and cotton, rice, salt, peanut oil, tea, cinnamon—all the produce of the neighbouring countries. These are separated and heaped up together for Mong Kai [*sic*] does no paltry counter business. Nothing but full cargoes can be got from the business-like allies of the pirate and smuggler. Here and there also are training houses for the kidnapped women, mostly Annamese, where they are educated up to Chinese ways, taught accomplishments, and spruced [*sic*] up for the market.<sup>42</sup>

For his part, French physician Hocquard reported that armed bands in Tonkin at times "captured women and children, took them into the mountains, and sold them to Chinese merchants who then exported them to certain provinces" in China.<sup>43</sup> Hocquard also stated that such kidnappings took place in the coastal areas of Tonkin as well, and that the women and children were transported in "special" boats outfitted with compartments intended to hide illicit cargo, and that in order to prevent the women and children from screaming or making any noise to attract attention, their captors generally drugged them with opium.<sup>44</sup>

By 1887 the French colonial administration itself was aware of the enormous scope of the *traite des femmes* in Indochina. In January of that year, *l'Avenir du*

*Tonkin*, a colonial newspaper, reported that French troops and a regiment of *tirailleurs indochinois* had been able to repel a series of attacks from a number of Chinese armed bands. In the process, the troops had been able to liberate more than 200 women and children who had been held captive by the group in question.<sup>45</sup> Two years later, the same newspaper reported that French troops had managed to recapture ten women who had been kidnapped from Bac Ninh province in the north.<sup>46</sup> This report, reprinted in the newspaper *Le Cochinchinois* in Saigon several days later, suggested that the “grands marchés de femmes et d’enfants” had been located in Danh Hoi and Ha Koi until 1885, when they moved to Dinh Lap and Lang Son.<sup>47</sup> The article further stated that the kidnappers were often chased by the Muong populations living in the border areas.<sup>48</sup>

Also in 1889, the French *résident* in Lang Son wrote that the sale of Vietnamese girls and women was conducted quite openly and was highly lucrative: “This lucrative commerce, given the prices one demands (100 piastres at least per person), is conducted *en grand* here and quite openly.”<sup>49</sup> In August of that year, General Bichot, who at the time was chief commander of French troops in Indochina, pointed out that for many of the armed bands who traveled the border areas, the capture of Vietnamese women and children was part of the expected booty when they attacked villages: “They seize the products of the soil, the beasts of burden, and even the women and children they will later clandestinely exchange for arms, munitions, and opium.”<sup>50</sup> In July 1889, the *résident* of Bac Ninh suggested the collusion of Chinese and Vietnamese bandits when he reported that approximately 100 Chinese and *Annamites* had pillaged a village in that province and had, in the process, also kidnapped a number of women.<sup>51</sup> These observations were transmitted to the French metropolitan government by the governor-general of Indochina. In one such report, he described in detail the methods used to sneak Vietnamese women and children into China:

The women captured by the pirates of the Delta or of the High Plateaus are handed over, in exchange for arms and munitions and opium, either to Chinese bands, along the border, either to the pirates of the Cat Ba or of the coast. Others are boarded clandestinely in Haiphong on ships heading to Hong Kong or they are sometimes brought to China by “false” Chinese parents, who, under the circumstances, force them to change into Chinese-style clothing so they will pass for young Chinese. These Chinese “parents” pretend these children are theirs, these young Vietnamese girls who are in fact destined to prostitution,

and the parents are given regular passports, with the mention "traveling with his or her children."<sup>52</sup>

In March 1890, *l'Avenir du Tonkin* reported that in Lang Son a Vietnamese woman had been kidnapped and 200 piastres had been stolen, and that "the Thanh Hoa band had attacked a convoy of 13 non-escorted junks," and that "five junks had been sunk, 25 women and children had been kidnapped, a number of coolies had been killed as well as one *tirailleur*."<sup>53</sup> Such reports were not limited to the colonial press. The *Times of London* had also reported on them, and had stated that these armed bands, some of them Vietnamese, were usually able to purchase arms and ammunition in Hong Kong from Chinese merchants who had previously purchased them from British or German merchants.<sup>54</sup> Often, the article went on to say, kidnapped women and children were "exported from Tonkin in exchange for them."<sup>55</sup>

These newspaper and official reports corroborated those from French missionaries. In his 1890 report on missionary activities in Tonkin, for example, Monseigneur Puginier contended that anti-French groups in Tonkin allied themselves with Chinese bands who engaged in "continuous incursions, kidnapping women and children (who were later sold openly in China) while also engaging in the contraband of opium and guns."<sup>56</sup> Two years earlier, in 1889, Puginier had again bemoaned the situation in western Tonkin, suggesting that the Black Flags continued their "massacres" and their kidnappings of Vietnamese women and children.<sup>57</sup> In 1894, Monseigneur Frichot wrote of the destruction of the village of Lang-Moi, where a priest had died "defending his Christians."<sup>58</sup> During the bandits' raid on the village, almost all Vietnamese had been killed except "a few women and children who were detained as slaves."<sup>59</sup> Three years later, missionaries recounted that in Song Chay, a young Vietnamese woman arrived with two children dressed in Chinese-style clothing. She apparently told the Catholic priest who met her that she had been kidnapped 14 years earlier. One of her kidnappers had forced her to marry him, and she had decided to make her way back to her native village only following her husband's death.<sup>60</sup>

These reports supported claims made by the French military in Indochina. In January 1890, General Bichot wrote a letter to the governor-general in Hanoi in which he described his troops' activities in Tonkin, and the discovery of a number of kidnappings. According to Bichot, bandits had recently attacked the village of Lang Gia, had burned 28 houses to the ground, and had "stolen" 25 women.<sup>61</sup> In

the village of Pho Cam, 150 bandits had “stolen” “35 women and children as well as 30 buffalo.”<sup>62</sup> Bichot also reported similar attacks in the villages of Binh Ke (4 women kidnapped) and Lang Ke (15 women).<sup>63</sup> According to the newspaper *l'Indépendance tonkinoise*, the scope of the trade was such that it “desolated” the populations of the Red River delta.<sup>64</sup> In February 1890, the same newspaper reported at length on the criminal-court trial of two Vietnamese women, Nguyen Thi Xich and Nguyen Thi Canh, both accused of having kidnapped and trafficked Vietnamese girls.<sup>65</sup> French commander P. Famin wrote in 1895 that much of this form of trafficking originated from a base in Nam Dinh from which “convoys of captured women and beasts” were transported to Guangxi.<sup>66</sup>

By May 1891 the *résident supérieur* of Tonkin was forced to admit that the *traite des femmes* was “flourishing.”<sup>67</sup> In the provinces of Cao Bang and Lao Cay, in November of that year, French colonial authorities reported that a group of about 30 men, with rapid-fire weapons, were regularly exchanging kidnapped women and children for more arms and for opium.<sup>68</sup> In Cao Bang alone, ten women had been kidnapped during raids on two small villages.<sup>69</sup> For his part, the governor-general of Indochina, also in 1891, admitted that these kidnappings were widespread, and that those caught stealing and later selling Vietnamese women and children were but a fraction of those involved in the trade:

The sort of kidnappings that come to our attention and for which we are able to punish the perpetrators are obviously but a small number compared to those that take place on a daily basis unbeknownst to us and that represent a major commercial enterprise along our land and water borders with China.<sup>70</sup>

By this time, French colonial authorities had become aware that this trade was not only the purview of Chinese bandits, but that there were also Vietnamese players involved in human trafficking. They also discovered that the trade was not limited to armed bands roaming the border areas. A complex network seemed to be taking shape as the trade also flourished in Hanoi itself, there relying on connections with Chinese and Vietnamese alike. There were serious attempts on the part of the French colonial administration and of the French military, if not to stop this trade, then at least to seriously impede it. In Lang Son, French colonel Servièrre had arrested a Chinese man by the name of Trinh Duc who had been found in possession of weapons and of five Vietnamese women whom he had hoped to sell in China. Servièrre had Trinh Duc executed, and then asked

the *résident supérieur* in Hanoi to arrest, among others, two elderly women in Hanoi (named Me Luu and Mi Duong) who, according to Trinh Duc's confession, had been his accomplices in the kidnappings of the five Vietnamese women in question.<sup>71</sup>

In 1891 the *résident supérieur* of Tonkin, a man by the name of Brière, requested that all *résidents* and *vice-résidents* and provincial chiefs throughout the region be highly vigilant when issuing travel papers to Chinese people, especially those traveling with children. Brière stated that "all too often these children are little *annamite* girls destined for prostitution."<sup>72</sup> He further stated that "all our efforts must be directed at trying to stop this *trafic infâme*" and that French colonial authorities needed to be very careful not to allow themselves, through carelessness, to become the unwitting accomplices of this trade.<sup>73</sup>

To suggest that French colonial authorities had their hands full already by this time would be a gross understatement. In 1892 the *résident supérieur* of Tonkin reported that in the province of Son Tay alone, banditry had reached epidemic proportions. One particular armed band, among many, was allegedly composed of more than 400 Chinese armed men who traveled from village to village demanding tribute. Villages refusing to comply were quickly attacked, and the houses were burned to the ground. Some villages apparently, out of fear, supplied the band also with food and other commodities. This band regularly engaged in trade with other bands, for opium in exchange for the women, children, and animals they had stolen from the villages.<sup>74</sup> In the province of Bac Ninh, another band composed of approximately 300 men was caught traveling with 60 kidnapped Vietnamese women.<sup>75</sup> In September 1892, a group of 100 Chinese men attacked the village of Ha Ich and kidnapped 26 people.<sup>76</sup>

By this time also, the sheer volume of the trade had grabbed the attention of French colonial journalists. Instances of kidnappings were reported regularly in *l'Avenir du Tonkin*. In the first few months of 1894, the French colonial press reported widely on what it referred to as "l'affaire des Chinois de Phu Lang Thuong." The year before, a number of Chinese business owners were arrested and brought to justice in the Cour criminelle du Tonkin for having engaged in the smuggling of arms, opium, alcohol, and humans. The newspaper also published, in March 1894, the complete transcripts of the trials in question.<sup>77</sup> The conclusion of the tribunal was that not only were a number of Chinese firms involved in the sale of Vietnamese women and children, but that some Vietnamese had also participated in the trade, particularly in the area of Phu Lang Thuong in

northern Vietnam. The *procureur* for the colonial administration accused a number of firms, such as the one owned by a Chinese man by the name of A Quan, of having sold Vietnamese women and children. Also accused was the Chinese-owned Lam Bo firm, which had apparently had a number of dealings with armed bands. For its part, the A Ca firm, also indicted, had allegedly left behind various logs and records, including correspondence, that revealed its ties to human traffickers in the border areas.<sup>78</sup> One of the prosecution's most important witnesses was a young Vietnamese woman who testified that she had been kidnapped and held for six months by a group of bandits. She stated that she had been freed by French troops who had attacked the smugglers in question. She was also able to recognize, present in the courtroom, a number of those accused of engaging in this wide network of human trafficking.<sup>79</sup> The trial transcripts also revealed that these Chinese businesses worked in cooperation with a number of Vietnamese men and go-betweens.<sup>80</sup>

In the weeks and months that followed the trial, *l'Avenir du Tonkin* published a number of articles placing the blame squarely on the Chinese, asking the French colonial government to rid Tonkin of the Chinese menace. In one instance, an article signed "Video" claimed that "Circumstances allow us to depict them [the Chinese] as spies, robbers of women and children, suppliers of weapons and munitions to bandits, pirates and supporters of pirates, instigators of revolts, affiliated with secret societies, smugglers, and usurers."<sup>81</sup>

In another article, it was suggested that these Chinese bandits "almost all have *annamite* wives stolen from the surrounding villages," and that one group in particular had with them a number of Vietnamese young boys whom they brought along during their "expeditions."<sup>82</sup> The article also made a more cryptic suggestion: "These young *annamites* serve as domestics and very often the Chinese will ... [*sic*] adopt them."<sup>83</sup> Instances of kidnappings of Vietnamese women and children were also consistently reported in the newspaper *l'Indépendance tonkinoise*. Between 1890 and 1895, the newspaper reported literally hundreds of cases of such kidnappings as it followed closely the French colonial "pacification" campaigns in northern Vietnam. Almost every military and police operation was reported upon, and whenever French military operations were successful, the newspaper made mention not only of the soldiers' actions, but also of the goods and the women and children they had liberated from the bandits.<sup>84</sup>

In attempting to stop this human trafficking, French colonial officials began to realize just how complex the problem was, for it also had repercussions on

its dealings with foreign countries, such as China, with whom it had signed important treaties and trade agreements. Most of the Chinese armed bands resented treaties that they deemed unequal and that often could adversely affect their own commercial activities. Various administrative, military, diplomatic, and police officials therefore discovered that dealing with their Chinese counterparts was sometimes as difficult as chasing the armed rebels or bandits. As early as 1891, the *résident supérieur* of Tonkin reported that not only were a number of Chinese military officers turning a blind eye to the trade, but that some were actually participating in it or benefiting from it. He claimed that in December 1890, for example, 111 young Vietnamese women had been stolen, and that the three considered to be the prettiest among them had been given to the son of a Chinese general named Phung Y.<sup>85</sup> He further claimed that Chinese officers were allowing bandits to operate freely: "Chinese officers not only contribute to the maintenance of this trade, but are even involved in it."<sup>86</sup> In 1892, *l'Indépendance tonkinoise* accused the Chinese foreign-affairs official and the viceroy of Canton, "one and the other, one with the other," of "fooling once again" the French representative in Peking.<sup>87</sup> Again, according to the newspaper, the French official in Peking had complained to the Chinese government about "the outrageous protection given to the pirates by the Chinese border officials concerning the sale of women and children stolen in Tonkin and transported to China."<sup>88</sup>

For his part, the *résident* of Haiphong complained, also in 1891, that all efforts to stop the trade would be futile unless Chinese authorities agreed to cooperate with French agents.<sup>89</sup> He deplored the fact that in spite of the illegality of the trade in China itself, few Chinese administrators had taken any measures to stem the tide of the trade.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, he explained, when two Vietnamese girls had managed to escape their Chinese captors and to return to Vietnam (in Lao Cay), the commander of the Chinese fort at Song Phong (a man by the name of Wei), where one of the girls had been held, had petitioned the *vice-résident* of Lao Cay to return the girl to China since she was his property.<sup>91</sup> The Vietnamese girl in question, who claimed she had been sold several times while in China, was approximately nine years old.<sup>92</sup> The other girl, who, it was estimated, seemed to be about 17 or 18 years old, was claimed by a Chinese merchant by the name of Phu Ho Ky, who argued that she was his second wife and belonged to him, since he had paid 32 *taels* of silver for her to a group of pirates approximately six or seven years earlier.<sup>93</sup> Aware of the gravity of the situation, the governor-general



of Indochina requested, in May 1891, “the intervention of the Minister of Foreign Affairs upon the Peking Court” in order to put an end to such practices.<sup>94</sup>

In China itself, French consuls were increasingly confronted with issues of human trafficking. In 1894 the French consul at Long Zhou reported that armed bands were planning to attack the consulate in order to reclaim some Vietnamese women who had escaped their clutches and had sought refuge there.<sup>95</sup> The consul in question was particularly distressed by the fact that none of the treaties negotiated between France and China contained clauses pertaining to the eventual repatriation of kidnapped colonial subjects.<sup>96</sup> To make matters worse, the consul explained that Chinese officials did not seem to understand France’s claims, and that they tended to perceive the repatriation of these women and children as the theft of the “property” of their Chinese subjects, who had indisputable ownership in their eyes.<sup>97</sup>

In addition to questions of jurisdiction, there were also issues pertaining to the cost of repatriation. In 1897 the French consul in Hong Kong asked the governor-general of Indochina for instructions concerning the repatriation of a 25-year-old Vietnamese woman who had been kidnapped five years earlier and been sold to a Chinese man who had not married her. She had escaped her “husband” and had made her way to the French consulate in Hong Kong, asking to be repatriated to Vietnam at the colonial government’s expense.<sup>98</sup> Her request was followed by a long series of letters between the French consulate in Hong Kong and the governor-general’s office in Hanoi. So far, there are no available archival documents allowing us to determine her ultimate fate, but the French consul in Hong Kong simply asked her, at the time of her request, to return two weeks later, the time it would likely take to resolve this bureaucratic problem.<sup>99</sup>

In order to foster greater cooperation between China and France, an agreement was signed in 1895 that established the creation of a joint police task force along the border areas.<sup>100</sup> This task force would name French commissioners (in Mong Cay, Cao Bang, Lang Son, Ha Giang, and Lao Cay) and Chinese commissioners (in Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan).<sup>101</sup> The agreement included provisions that would establish police “relay” teams should bandit groups successfully cross the border in either direction.<sup>102</sup> The aim of the task force was not to deal solely with the problem of human trafficking. Its purpose was to end criminal activity and illegal trade of all kinds along those border areas. Nonetheless, a number of the regulations and instructions set in place, such as the careful issuance of travel permits and the close inspection of cargo, would

likely allow the commissioners on both sides of the border to significantly reduce instances of human trafficking.

If policing the border areas was a step in the right direction, it was nonetheless merely a drop in the ocean. By the late 1890s, it became apparent that human trafficking was also prevalent in Vietnamese port cities such as Hon Gai and Haiphong. From there, most of the trafficked Vietnamese women and children were hidden in the cargo areas of steamers and junks and then were shipped to Hong Kong or to the island of Hai Nan. In 1905, five Vietnamese women were found hidden and bound in the cargo hold of a Chinese junk. The captain of a passing French customs ship alerted French authorities after having boarded the suspicious vessel. The women, when questioned by authorities, claimed that their captors had tried to throw them overboard at the sight of the oncoming French customs ship.<sup>103</sup> In order to better monitor the ships leaving the port of Haiphong, the governor-general of Indochina announced in 1906 that he was creating a special police force whose primary function would be to monitor activities in the port.<sup>104</sup> Also in 1906, the *résident supérieur* of Tonkin declared that he was ordering the surveillance of all ports in the region, and the search of all steamers and junks. He called for regular checks of all storage spaces in these vessels, and he issued strict instructions to all provincial chiefs to monitor closely all people traveling in their districts, especially those accompanied by children.<sup>105</sup> Similar instructions were subsequently given to officers of the Haiphong municipal police.<sup>106</sup> Sadly, on a number of occasions such well-intentioned measures, whose purpose was to put an end to this trade, resulted in tragedy. In 1908, for example, a number of Vietnamese women were thrown off a Chinese junk not far from the coast in northern Vietnam. Fearing arrest and severe punishment, their captors had in all likelihood decided to rid themselves of the "incriminating evidence."<sup>107</sup> The *résident supérieur* of Tonkin reported a few days later that two Vietnamese women who had acted as intermediaries, Nguyen Thi Viet and An Thi Tu, had been arrested, and that the investigation into this incident was continuing.<sup>108</sup> Another such incident was reported in April 1912, when a Vietnamese woman who had been rescued from her captors recounted that her kidnappers had killed her child in order to facilitate her transport, and that of seven other kidnapped women, into the forest.<sup>109</sup> In 1929 a Vietnamese woman, who had earlier been kidnapped and sold as a concubine to a Chinese man, stated that while in "captivity" in China she had met other Vietnamese women and girls who told her they too had been kidnapped and had seen their

captors throw overboard from a junk 10 or 12 Vietnamese women for fear of being caught with their illegal cargo.<sup>110</sup>

Another major impediment to stopping this trade was the sheer volume of maritime commerce to and from Indochina, a volume that increased significantly during the first two decades of the twentieth century. According to the French colonial administration's own statistics, approximately 2,214 ships (steamers as well as junks) entered Indochinese ports in 1914, while an estimated 2,175 ships left Indochinese ports that same year.<sup>111</sup> By 1926, some 3,061 ships entered while 2,891 left Indochinese ports.<sup>112</sup> In addition, while many of these ships came from places as diverse as England, Belgium, Holland, South Africa, and the Americas, their cargo was usually destined for delivery in Chinese ports. In 1926, for example, 429 steamers were headed for Hong Kong, while 444 were headed for other Chinese port cities such as Canton and Shanghai.<sup>113</sup> As for junks, that same year 714 were headed for Chinese ports.<sup>114</sup>

In addition to greater surveillance, some French officials called for stiffer penalties against those found guilty of human trafficking. Despite the fact that in 1891 a Chinese man found guilty of having kidnapped Vietnamese women had been sentenced to 11 years of hard labor, the French vice consul of Long-Zhou called for more severe penalties and even stated that "only capital punishment" would be an effective deterrent.<sup>115</sup> One of his successors must have paid attention, for in Long-Zhou, in 1912, five men were executed for having kidnapped five Vietnamese women.<sup>116</sup>

The French metropolitan government was of course painfully aware of the breadth of the problem, since in 1904, in Paris, it signed an international agreement for the suppression of the "White Slave Traffic."<sup>117</sup> The agreement, signed by France, Britain, Denmark, Spain, and Belgium, among others, called for the coordination of "all information relative to the procuring of women and girls for immoral purposes abroad."<sup>118</sup> The signatories agreed to keep a watchful eye, particularly in railway stations and "ports of embarkation." There were also articles pertaining to the detention and repatriation of women and children found to have been "the victims of criminal traffic," and France stated that it would apply the terms of the agreement to its colonies as well.<sup>119</sup> There was another agreement in 1910, whose purpose was to expand the one signed six years earlier. The new agreement was amended to "include trafficking within national boundaries."<sup>120</sup> An additional agreement, in 1921, included a clause relevant to the trafficking of boys.<sup>121</sup>

In French Indochina specifically, a decree was issued in 1909, stipulating that anyone caught selling, leasing, or giving away "persons" could be condemned for a period of anywhere between six months to two years in prison.<sup>122</sup> Should the "persons" being trafficked be minors, the prison sentences could be as long as three years.<sup>123</sup> Sentences of five years could be meted out if the people trafficking minors were the victims' own relatives: fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, brothers, or sisters.<sup>124</sup> Finally, in order to deter potential *entremetteuses*, the decree called for six months to three years in prison for anyone caught leaving Indochina with a minor without proper certification.<sup>125</sup> Although French prisons in Indochina were known to be difficult places, these sentences nonetheless appear too lenient to have been an effective counterbalance to the material gains enjoyed by those who engaged in this illegal trade.

In spite of such measures, the trade not only continued, but actually increased. In Vietnam, in 1916, the governor-general of Indochina reported that a Chinese banker had illegally purchased, in Thanh Hoa, a number of Vietnamese children. The children had been returned to Haiphong, and an investigation was launched. However, following this inquiry, no charges were brought against the banker, for want of evidence.<sup>126</sup> A 1919 report on the political and general situation of Hai Nan stipulated that the kidnappings of Vietnamese women and children were increasing steadily.<sup>127</sup> Such incidents were all the more frequent in the 1920s. Police reports from the border areas were constant. In May 1926, for example, one young Vietnamese girl was kidnapped in Ning Minh, and one more was abducted in Khuoi Phuc village. In July, the same armed band, known as the Chu Ten Kinh band, captured five Vietnamese girls, one young boy, and four women as they made their way to work in the fields.<sup>128</sup> In August of the same year, the Chu Ten Kinh band had kidnapped ten girls and seven women.<sup>129</sup> This same armed group was still in action two years later, a time span during which they had allegedly kidnapped 149 Vietnamese girls and approximately 50 women.<sup>130</sup> In 1927 alone, the *police frontière* reported the kidnapping of at least 76 Vietnamese women and children.<sup>131</sup> Another dangerous band, the "Tchung Pat" band, was reported sacking and burning villages in the Tonkin/China border areas in 1929. Reports indicated that in the process of attacking and pillaging villages, the band in question also engaged in killings and in the kidnapping of Vietnamese girls.<sup>132</sup>

Meanwhile, repatriation of rescued women and children continued to pose problems. In 1913 the French vice consul of Long Zhou pointed out that the

repatriation of Vietnamese women and children was fairly straightforward if they were found prior to being sold.<sup>133</sup> These women and children were usually handed back, without question, to French consular officials, who arranged their return to Vietnam. Once sold, however, these victims were caught in the middle of jurisdictional battles. In many instances, those who considered themselves the owners of these women and children were able to pressure or intimidate local Chinese officials. As a result, cooperation was virtually nonexistent. Those who believed they owned this human “cargo” often tried to reclaim them through the use of force. In Long Zhou, for example, the vice consul explained that from 1911 to 1912 he had organized at least 27 such repatriations:

Of those, one who had been held by the Chinese was returned to me under threat, thirteen others found refuge on their own at the consulate, and to keep them there and protect them against attempts to recapture them by violent means, I have had to personally ensure constant surveillance during their stay here, which was in some cases long, from the time of their arrival to the time I judged appropriate for their repatriation.<sup>134</sup>

At times, the vice-consulate was unable to get local officials to hand over these women and children unless financial reparations were paid. At times, the French vice consul of Long Zhou had himself made the two-day journey to the border in order to ensure the safe repatriation of his charges.<sup>135</sup>

The French consuls in China were also embroiled in diplomatic disputes with some European countries that had established concessions and consulates in various parts of China. In January 1907, for example, the French vice consul at Hoi Hao (the main port on the island of Hai Nan) wrote a letter to his colleague the French consul in Peking, asking for diplomatic action to be taken in order to ensure the collaboration of the German consul based in Hoi Hao. At issue was the fact that a substantial number of kidnapped Vietnamese children had ended up in prostitution houses on the island of Hai Nan after having been kidnapped, hidden, and transported aboard German ships. These ships usually sailed to Hong Kong or to Hai Nan from Haiphong. In order to prevent this in the future, French vice consul Joseph Beauvais asked his British and German colleagues to work together with him to draft regulations for the inspection of suspected ships. The British consul, a Mr. Savage, agreed readily, as did the acting German consul, Dr. Walter. According to their agreement, the Chinese

commissioner of customs was to be given the power to board and search any ship suspected of holding human cargo. The agreement also stipulated that the Chinese commissioner of customs could then detain those suspected of having participated in the illicit trade.<sup>136</sup> Once the actual German consul returned, however, he (Mr. Von Varchmin) refused to comply with the regulations drafted by the colleague who had replaced him temporarily. He claimed that the French, German, and British ministers of foreign affairs had not yet officially approved the regulations, and that they were therefore "null and void."<sup>137</sup> He further added that had he been in service at the time, he would "never had signed the regulations."<sup>138</sup> In a letter to Beauvais, Von Varchmin expressed his displeasure at the fact that a Chinese customs commissioner had made his way onto a German ship, the *Carl Diederichsen*, and had found kidnapped Vietnamese women and children. The German crew had apparently not been aware of the presence of the smuggled women and children. And, Von Varchmin claimed that since he considered the draft regulations "null and void":

No passenger nor any single person could be taken off the "Carl Diederichsen" neither by members of your staff nor by any other Chinese officials without the full and distinct consent of the officer in charge of the German consulate. Apart from that the four kidnapped girls being Annamese the requisition for being taken off the steamer ought to have come, as in former cases, from the French consul. There was no reason for the Chinese authorities to interfere.<sup>139</sup>

Von Varchmin added that even in the case of human trafficking, "customs officers are expected to act intelligently and judiciously, and they must not cause the least unnecessary annoyance and inconvenience to *bona fide* passengers or to anyone belonging to the ship."<sup>140</sup> Beauvais was outraged by the attitude of Von Varchmin, who seemed to be placing petty jurisdictional issues above the need for action against the trafficking of women and children. At stake for Von Varchmin was proper protocol. For Beauvais, it was the women and the children, and he attempted, on several occasions, to convince the French minister of Foreign Affairs to intervene diplomatically. It seems that tensions between France and Germany in the European theater had also traveled to the colonies. If Beauvais was having difficulty convincing his German counterpart in Hoi Hao, he was able, at least, to enjoy the full cooperation of the British consul posted there.

By the early 1920s there had developed a significant Vietnamese and French press in Indochina. A number of newspapers commented on what they termed “la traite des jaunes.” *L’Echo annamite*, a newspaper based in Saigon, claimed that this human trafficking was mostly centered around the port of Haiphong in Tonkin, and that the “contrabande de chair à plaisir” was as lucrative, if not more, than that of opium.<sup>141</sup> In addition, in one of its articles, the newspaper provided graphic details concerning the case of a Vietnamese girl who had been killed and decapitated by her captors for fear of being caught and arrested by the police.<sup>142</sup> The same newspaper also reported that this trade was now also pervasive in Hanoi:

A Frenchman, a man of wealth, who gave himself the trouble of counting its numbers, arrived at an impressive sum. He found that in Hanoi alone the traffickers of human flesh stole, in a span of two years only, approximately 300 children and an equal number of minors.<sup>143</sup>

The author of the article, Nam Phuong, blamed specifically the *me-min*, the Vietnamese women who acted as intermediaries in the sale of these women and girls. He also called for severe sanctions against those arrested, and he suggested the creation of an association whose purpose would be the protection of Vietnamese children against such kidnappings.<sup>144</sup> For its part, *l’Argus indo-chinois* blamed the Chinese. The newspaper included these kidnappings in its long list of grievances against the Chinese in Vietnam and in the border areas. The paper’s editorials claimed that the French colonial administration had so far been unable to curtail these odious crimes:

The measures taken by the powers that be have so far been unable to put an end to such shameful practices, and we can even say that for a while now the *négrriers* who operate along the coast of Annam and Tonkin continue to kidnap with unimaginable audacity.<sup>145</sup>

For the newspaper, these crimes were yet another example of Chinese exactions committed against Vietnam, actions that reflected China’s proprietary attitude towards Vietnam—an attitude they believed the French colonial administration failed to address or even recognize: “The Chinese are too comfortable here, and because they are spoiled, they think they are the masters just as they were when

Annam was subjected to China's tyranny."<sup>146</sup> While Tonkin appeared to be the center of this trade, the newspaper *La Cochinchine libérale* was eager to point out in 1920 that "it is not only in Tonkin that this infamous trade exists; In Cochinchina, In Saigon, even, the commerce of little Chinese and Vietnamese girls takes place openly and neither the police nor the justice system seem moved by it."<sup>147</sup>

The trafficking of Vietnamese women and children also made its way into numerous published works, such as essays and novels. In 1913 Louis Carpeaux published his novel *La chasse aux pirates*, in which he not only wrote a fictional account of the French military's pacification campaigns in Tonkin, but also of the "pirates" and their violent incursions into the northern Vietnamese countryside, where Vietnamese villages were destroyed and "their women and their cattle kidnapped."<sup>148</sup> In 1930, Paul Monet, an ardent critic of French colonial policies, wrote *Les jauniers*, in which he denounced French colonial practices pertaining especially to the recruitment of Vietnamese coolies for work in the plantations. *Les jauniers* also made mention of "la traite des enfants et des jeunes filles" in Vietnam.<sup>149</sup>

These publications, as well as the press coverage of this human trafficking, not only indicated that the problem was widespread and well-known, but they also proved to be an embarrassment for the French colonial administration, who seemed unable to stop the trade. Many administrators were defensive about the trade and attempted to deny that it was endemic. In July 1907, the head of the *Cabinet du personnel* in Saigon wrote a letter to a metropolitan senator, assuring him that "it is not correct to suggest that the sale and kidnapping of children took place on a daily basis or that they were always committed with guilty intentions."<sup>150</sup> He claimed that in most instances Vietnamese parents willingly "exchanged" their children with Chinese families, and that this had been a tradition from "time immemorial."<sup>151</sup> He further maintained that the cases of Vietnamese girls being sold into prostitution in China were few and far between.<sup>152</sup>

Such representations of the problem were in direct contradiction with the accounts provided by the French consuls in China and by the *résidents* in Tonkin. Just a few months earlier, Joseph Beauvais, in Hoi Hao, had reported finding nine Vietnamese girls who had been held in a Hoi Hao hotel.<sup>153</sup> Later the same day, Beauvais had found an additional seven children hidden in other neighborhoods. These children had been brought aboard the *Carl Diederichsen*. Another ship, the *Hanoi*, had brought 30 children to Hoi Hao—children who



were subsequently found in different hotels throughout the city.<sup>154</sup> Beauvais's conclusions were markedly different from those of his compatriots in the French colonial administration:

For this type of export to reach these numbers, that in one day 30 children could be hidden aboard a steamer, in the port of Hai Phong, and that a few days later 22 more, what is inconceivable is that we cannot explain this except by admitting to a deplorable negligence or an extraordinary lack of conscience on the part of the police and of the customs officials. And we can seriously ask ourselves if there is not also the complicity of native officials on both sides.<sup>155</sup>

Beauvais's assessment of the scope of the *traite des femmes* was more likely correct, and was corroborated by his colleagues posted in other consular offices in China. In 1910, the French consul in Canton reported that he had been made aware of the presence of 15 Vietnamese women being held in brothels in Fatshan, a large city near Canton.<sup>156</sup> The consul in question (Réau) wrote to the minister of Foreign Affairs in France and claimed that he had managed to free the 15 women with the "tepid" assistance of the local authorities.<sup>157</sup> Similar reports were filed in 1915 by the consuls in Guangdong and Hong Kong<sup>158</sup> and by the vice consul in Pak Hoi.<sup>159</sup> In April 1912, the *résident supérieur* of Tonkin stated quite clearly that the kidnappings of women were "very frequent" in Tonkin, and that the number of cases brought to his attention were but a small portion of the increase in this traffic.<sup>160</sup>

The consuls' reports echoed broader international concerns about the trafficking of women and children. An international association, the British Continental and General Federation for the Abolition of the Government Regulation of Prostitution, was founded in 1875.<sup>161</sup> The association had developed out of the prostitution abolitionist movement, whose members believed that state-sanctioned and regulated prostitution actually "intensified traffic in prostitutes to areas where it was legal"—as it was in French Indochina and parts of China.<sup>162</sup> Eventually, a number of women's international associations, including abolitionist groups, set up headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, where the offices of the League of Nations were located.

In 1921, the League of Nations decided to hold a conference to examine the worldwide problem of the *traite des femmes et des enfants*. The stated and specific aim of the conference was to "harmonize the opinion of the different

governments in order that common action might be taken."<sup>163</sup> Eleven years later, in 1932, the League of Nations sponsored an investigation into the trade in women and children in the East. By this time there were also anti-human-trafficking organizations around the world (in Great Britain, the United States, and France, for example). These organizations attempted to prompt the governments of different countries to draw up legislation condemning these practices, and attempted also to convince them to severely penalize those engaged in this trade. Pertaining specifically to the sale in China of Vietnamese women and children, the report stated that the trade was still taking place in the border areas, as well as along the coast of Tonkin.<sup>164</sup> The report further stated that traffickers generally used elderly women whose economic situations were particularly precarious to lure and convince young Vietnamese women to cross the border into China.<sup>165</sup> Those who had investigated the existence of this trade in Tonkin had met with some Vietnamese girls who had been the victims of such tactics. One victim had explained that she had been approached by an elderly Vietnamese woman who had convinced her to travel to a nearby village in order to purchase areca nuts because they were less expensive there. The two of them made their way towards the village in a sampan when the elderly woman declared she was lost. At some point, while the older woman feigned trying to find her way, the young Vietnamese woman fell asleep. When she woke up, the elderly woman had left, and the young woman found herself alone in the company of four Chinese men. She claimed that she had then been taken, at knife-point, to a cave where there were five other young Vietnamese women being held captive. The young woman who recounted this story said that she was later sold at a market for 236 silver dollars.<sup>166</sup>

International commissions notwithstanding, the trade continued in Vietnam, and in 1935 the newspaper *l'Annam nouveau* reported that the kidnappings of Vietnamese girls were numerous. The newspaper also reported that a human-trafficking network had been discovered in Tonkin—a network run and operated by, among others, a Chinese woman named Nam Keu.<sup>167</sup> While the newspaper rejoiced at the arrest of one of the alleged leaders of a "powerful organization," it also alluded to the existence of many smaller, less powerful, but no less active networks.<sup>168</sup> In 1937, the governor-general of Indochina wrote a letter to authorities in Paris stating that the *indigènes du Tonkin* were calling for a greater police presence in the Gulf of Tonkin area in order to stem the tide of the traffic in Vietnamese women and children.<sup>169</sup> He further stipulated in 1938 that between

July 1936 and December 1937, 20 cases of trafficking of Vietnamese women and children had been reported in Tonkin, and that in most instances, the victims had been transported in Chinese junks.<sup>170</sup>

In conclusion, although this specific essay is but a small part of what will be a larger study, the evidence examined so far clearly illustrates the existence of human trafficking from Vietnam to China between 1873 and 1935. The United Nations today defines human trafficking as the

recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.<sup>171</sup>

While “human trafficking” is a contemporary term, it is clear that its definition, as stated above, may be applied to the cases highlighted in this essay. Much like the current situation, the kidnapping and sale of Vietnamese women and children during the period between 1873 and 1935 was made possible by a number of factors. As Francis Miko has noted, “Human trafficking is one of the oldest crimes and can be traced to early human history,” and “it feeds on poverty, despair, war, crisis, and ignorance.”<sup>172</sup> All of these factors were present in Vietnam between 1873 and 1935. Moreover, when it comes to women and children, this type of smuggling generally takes place within the confines of specific “gendered cultural practices.”<sup>173</sup> In the case of Confucian societies, such as China and Vietnam, the family line was traditionally perpetuated by male descendants. Marriages were exogamous; after marriage, women left their families to join those of their husbands. The responsibility for the support of elderly parents usually rested on the shoulders of the eldest son. Daughters were therefore often considered a financial burden and were expected to leave the family fold, even if most subsequently maintained close ties with their own families. Given the poverty levels of peasant society in Vietnam, particularly during the French colonial period, women and children were all the more vulnerable to this sort of commerce. In addition, prostitution was a feature of traditional Confucian societies. This explains, in part, the continuity of human trafficking from precolonial to colonial Vietnam. As Kathleen Barry has noted: “Effective mass marketing of sex requires that sexual exploitation be normalized. For it to be bought and sold on the markets

of local brothels or in giant sex industries, there must be some social sanction of it."<sup>174</sup> The fact that *maisons de tolérance* were legal in French Indochina, and that brothels were legal as well, in various forms, in China, attests to the form of "sanction" to which Barry refers.

Colonial rule itself also contributed to the maintenance and the development of human trafficking in Vietnam in a number of ways. First, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the border areas between Tonkin and China were often transformed into battlefields. French troops were engaged in the pacification of the area. French claims in southern China also made the borders more ambiguous, more porous. In Tonkin, there was fierce armed resistance against French troops. In southern China, there were also secret societies, such as the Black Flags, who were engaged in anti-Qing as well as anti-foreigner resistance. These groups saw women and children as commodities to be bartered in exchange for either cash or arms—commodities necessary in their eyes to rid China and Vietnam of foreign intervention and domination. In a perverse way, the trafficking of women and children was practiced in the name of patriotism or nationalism.

In addition, these armed clashes along the border areas, as well as the political chaos in China and in Vietnam engendered by the imperial and colonial projects of France, Britain, and other powers, had a devastating effect on the economy of the area, prompting many to resort to banditry for sustenance. As historian Peter Zinoman has stated in his study of imprisonment in Vietnam between 1862 and 1940, "the Indochinese inmate population was dominated by thieves."<sup>175</sup> Zinoman further adds that "violations of state monopolies for opium, alcohol, and gambling were another category of frequently prosecuted offenses."<sup>176</sup> A number of other scholars, such as Ngo Vinh Long, have examined in detail the impact of these monopolies and economic policies in the pauperization of large segments of the Vietnamese peasant population.<sup>177</sup> In an attempt to explain banditry in Vietnam, the newspaper *le Courrier d'Haiphong* stated, in 1887, that the Vietnamese "pirate" was not a pirate by nature, but a pirate by "necessity," and that he engaged in banditry "when the rice field was unproductive."<sup>178</sup> The economic vulnerability of Vietnamese, as well as Chinese, made women and children even easier prey under such circumstances.

Second, although there were already "markets" for the sale of women and children by the 1870s, human trafficking seems to have grown at even greater levels beginning in the early twentieth century. By this time, in French Indochina, Paul Doumer had begun his *mise en valeur* of France's "possessions" in Asia.

The economic development of Indochina depended upon a number of factors. First was the development of an export plantation economy that required the acquisition of large tracts of land. Combined with the establishment of a modern taxation system, this *accaparement des terres* in Indochina ultimately left many Vietnamese landless. Second, the development of the Indochinese economy required the creation of modern, sophisticated, and rapid communications systems as well as the establishment of trade networks within Asia, particularly with Chinese ports. Economic development was also enhanced through trade with other European nations, such as Britain and Germany, that frequented the same Chinese ports as did the French—Hong Kong, Canton, Hoi Hao, and Shanghai among others. Agreements between these countries also allowed the presence of their ships in Vietnamese ports such as Haiphong and Hon Gai. It became more and more difficult to systematically monitor the ships making their way in and out of these harbors. As a result, it was relatively easy for human cargo to be hidden in the bowels of these junks and steamers. Also, travel, by road or by rail, between Vietnam and China became commonplace. It became difficult there, as well, to monitor the comings and goings of all passengers. When French colonial authorities began to require identity cards and travel passes for all travelers, especially those traveling with children, there developed also a new type of illegal business, that of selling false papers. These factors, as well as the amount of money human trafficking could generate, made this type of smuggling highly attractive and almost impossible to stop.

## NOTES

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5. Gu Xiaosong and Brantly Womack, "Border Cooperation between China and Vietnam in the 1990's," *Asian Survey* 40 (November/December 2000): 1044.
6. *Ibid.*
7. For analyses of these trafficking networks, please refer to the following studies: Hong-zen Wang, "Hidden Spaces of Resistance of the Subordinated: Case Studies from Vietnamese

- Female Migrant Partners in Taiwan," *International Migration* 41 (2007): 706–27; Annuska Derks, *Trafficking of Vietnamese Women and Children to Cambodia* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration and Center for Advanced Study, 1998).
8. "Vietnam Jails 6 for Trafficking more than 120 Women to Malaysia," *Associated Press News Wires*, 26 July 2007.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. "Finland Funds Efforts to Curb Women Trafficking," *Hoi Lien Phu Nu Viet Nam* (Viet Nam Women's Union), 23 January 2007.
12. "Vietnam Women's Union Contest of Communicators against Trafficking in Women and Children," *Hoi Lien Phu Nu Viet Nam* (Vietnam Women's Union), 30 September 2007.
13. June J. H. Lee, "Human Trafficking in East Asia: Current Trends, Data Collection, and Knowledge Gaps," *International Migration* 43 (2005): 173.
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15. Nguyen Van Phong, *La société vietnamienne de 1882 à 1902* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1971), 222–23.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. Fernand Malot, *La Commune annamite*, thèse du doctorat, Faculté de droit de l'Université de Paris, 1903, 19.
19. Dr. Hocquard, *Une campagne au Tonkin* (Paris: Arléa, 1999), 5.
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22. Centre des archives d'Outre Mer [hereafter CAOM], Gouvernement général de l'Indochine [hereafter GGI], dossier 22526.
23. For more on Vietnamese laws concerning adoption, please refer to the following: P.-J. Silvestre, *Considérations sur l'étude du droit annamite* (Saigon: Imprimerie Nouvelle Albert Portail, 1922), 207–20.
24. Hoang Dao Thuy, *Pho Phuong Ha Noi Xua* (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Van Hoa-Thong Tin, 2000), 204–5.
25. Katarina Leppanen, "Movement of Women: Trafficking in the Interwar Era," *Women's Studies International Forum* 30 (2007): 523.
26. Alain G. Marsot, *The Chinese Community in Vietnam under the French* (Lewiston, N.Y.:

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27. Missions étrangères de Paris [hereafter MEP], Monseigneur Gauthier, *Rapport annuel des évêques, Tonkin méridional*, 1873.
  28. MEP, Monseigneur Guillemain, *Rapport annuel des évêques, Kouang-Tong/Hai Nan*, 1875.
  29. MEP, Monseigneur Gauthier, *Rapport annuel des évêques, Tonkin méridional*, 1875.
  30. MEP, Monseigneur Guillemain, *Rapport annuel des évêques, Kouang-Tong/Hai Nan*, 1875.
  31. MEP, Monseigneur Guillemain, *Rapport annuel des évêques, Kouang-Tong/Hai Nan*, 1878.
  32. MEP, *Notice biographique*, Jean-Marie Delavay.
  33. MEP, *Notice biographique*, Emile-Alphonse Mioux. All translations in this essay are mine.
  34. The term *annamite* was, during the French colonial period, synonymous with the term “Vietnamese.” The term stemmed from the word *Annam*, a word used by the Chinese to refer to their “southern provinces.” The French colonial government then called Annam one of three administrative regions in Vietnam (Tonkin in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochinchina in the south).
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  36. MEP, Monseigneur Pineau, *Rapport annuel des évêques, Tonkin méridional*, 1888.
  37. Dick de Lonlay, *Au Tonkin, 1883–1885: Récits* (Paris: Garnier et Frères, 1886), 123.
  38. Louis Loyzeau de Grandmaison, *Expansion française au Tonkin: En territoire militaire* (Paris: Plon, Nourrit et Cie., 1898), 128.
  39. *Ibid.*, 129.
  40. *Galliéni au Tonkin (1892–1896)* (Paris: Éditions Berger-Lebrault, 1948), 179.
  41. *Ibid.*
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  44. *Ibid.*, 512.
  45. *L’Avenir du Tonkin* [hereafter AT], 15 January 1887.
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  47. *Le Cochinchinois*, 26 May 1889.
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  49. CAOM, GGI, dossier 22272.
  50. *Ibid.*

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69. *Ibid.*
70. CAOM, GGI, dossier 22525.
71. CAOM, GGI, dossier 22382.
72. *Ibid.*
73. *Ibid.*
74. CAOM, GGI, dossier 22272.
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76. CAOM, GGI, dossier 22386.
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79. *Ibid.*
80. *Ibid.*
81. AT, 28 April 1894.
82. AT, 26 May 1894.
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88. *Ibid.*
89. CAOM, GGI, dossier 22525.
90. *Ibid.*
91. *Ibid.*
92. *Ibid.*
93. *Ibid.*
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