

Gerard Sasges, Univ. of California-Berkeley / Univ. of California Education
Abroad Program Việt Nam Study Center

'Indigenous representation is hostile to all monopolies': Pham Quỳnh and the end of the alcohol monopoly in colonial Viet Nam.

The historiography of the colonial period in Viet Nam has had great difficulty integrating the stories of the men and women who were prominent supporters of French rule. One such person was Phạm Quỳnh. Until his death in 1945, Quỳnh was one of the most prominent apologists for French rule, serving as editor of the literary and political journal *Nam Phong*, as a representative in a various consultative assemblies, and as chief of staff of Emperor Bảo Đại's government after 1933. For decades, Quỳnh was vilified by the post-independence government in Hanoi, as well as a generation of Western scholars sympathetic to the anti-colonial movement. This paper focuses on Quỳnh's political writings, and above all on his political activities. It is the result of research conducted at the National Archives in Hanoi and the French Overseas Archives in Aix, and is based on a chapter of my dissertation "Contraband, Capital, and the Colonial State: the alcohol monopoly in Northern Viet Nam 1897-1933." It argues that Quỳnh's participation in politics was concrete and effective, and that he and other reformers participated in good faith in the project of associationism. It goes beyond Nationalist or Communist teleologies, and argues that the 1930s should be seen as a moment when the consultative bodies created by the French for a time fulfilled their potential of providing the basis for the gradual evolution towards an independent representative government, and the dismantling of the French monopolies on political and economic power.

Throughout the colonial period, Annamese from every walk of life were united in opposition to the state's monopoly on the production and sale of alcohol, and to the French corporation that exploited the monopoly, the *Société Française des Distilleries de l'Indochine* (SFDIC). In the immediate aftermath of the unrest that swept Indochina in 1925 and 1926, the director of the SFDIC and one of the richest men in Indochina, A.R. Fontaine, published a series of books elaborating a vision of a possible Indochina where the French reasserted their domination and denied the possibility of meaningful political evolution. In response, Quỳnh articulated a political program that he felt would provide the basis for gradual evolution towards self-government, and published a series of articles intended to educate Vietnamese in the forms and usages of representative democracy. When in 1931, the administration put the issue of the renewal of the alcohol monopoly before the colony's highest consultative body, the *Grand Conseil*, Quỳnh was provided with a test case for his vision of collaboration. In a series of articles and then in debate before the *Grand Conseil*, Quỳnh gave voice to Vietnamese demands

calling for an end to the monopoly's economic exploitation and its accompanying systems of surveillance and repression. His condemnation of the SFDIC's economic monopoly contained a thinly veiled critique of the state's monopoly on political power: for Quỳnh and others who shared his vision, genuine collaboration would require the dismantling of both.

The debate and subsequent defeat of the government's alcohol project in debate before the Grand Conseil is thus representative of larger issues of associationism, collaboration, and political evolution. The impassioned speeches of the Vietnamese representatives made it clear that for collaboration to have any meaning, it would require the dismantling of the most exploitative and repressive elements of the colonial state. The alcohol debate thus symbolized a choice between two alternate futures: between political stasis or evolution, between the Imperial court and the Grand Conseil, between monopolistic exploitation and the free market, between repression and consent. If it was unclear in 1931 what form Annam's future would take, it was at least clear that both futures were eminently possible.

The paper uses the figure of Pham Quỳnh to argue that many of the men and women commonly labelled collaborators were participating in good faith in a process of political negotiation and evolution that often placed them in positions of real, effective opposition to the colonial state they supposedly served. Both papers fit squarely within the conference's objective of moving beyond the dichotomous paradigms that have framed our understanding of the history of Viet Nam.