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'This Ignoble Traffic': The Trade in Vietnamese Women and Children During the Period of French Colonial Rule, 1885-1945

After the consolidation of French rule in Việt Nam in 1885, French troops patrolled the border areas between southern China and northern Việt Nam, trying to capture armed bands, from both sides, involved in "illegal" trade. The French colonial administration soon discovered that a number of these bands were engaged in the kidnapping of Vietnamese women and children who were then sold in China as domestic servants, concubines, or even as prostitutes. By 1891 colonial authorities expressed their dismay at the scope of this human trafficking. By the 1920's, the trade was widespread not only along the border areas, but also along the coastline of northern Việt Nam, and even in urban centers such as Hà Ni. This paper examines the nature and the scope of this trade as well as the ways in which French colonial rule, while denouncing it, also unwittingly put in place a number of mechanisms that would increase its volume. Analysis of this trade demonstrates that it existed long before the advent of French rule, but that the colonial "mise en valeur" of Indochina greatly exacerbated the problem. Ironically, it was also the serious political repression set in place by French colonial authorities that would ultimately succeed, in the 1930's, in reducing the number of such kidnappings. While the voices of these women will likely remain largely silent, an examination of archival materials (police reports, military reports, consular reports and correspondance and so on), of period newspapers, of memoirs, of literature, will allow us to better understand what is still today considered to be an important problem in Việt Nam.

In addition to approaching uncharted historical territory, this paper proposes a number of new vantage points from which to study Vietnamese history. First, this paper analyzes human trafficking, from Việt Nam to China, outside the interpretive boundaries set by the standard periodization of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Việt Nam (or of feudalism, colonialism, and socialism). It examines the continuity of this traffic in humans and attempts to understand the phenomenon through an analysis of the ways in which this trade was altered, abetted, or thwarted by French colonial power. Second, it proposes a feminist perspective on this "trade" by examining the political, economic, social, cultural, and gender-based framework within which it took place. For at the center of this trade are numerous assumptions about women (and children) that cannot emerge through an analysis based on the standard periodizations or approaches. The persistence of this trade today illustrates quite clearly that the historical progression, in Việt Nam, from "feudalism" to "colonialism" to "socialism" has done little to alter the ways in which women and children are often viewed as "commodities." The ebb and flow of

this trade, over the course of centuries and within vastly different political and economic contexts, points to a phenomenon that transcends questions of colonialism, nationalism, socialism, and independence