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## From the Social to the Political: 1920s Colonial Saigon as a Space of Possibilities in Vietnamese Consciousness

Based on a PhD dissertation/book project focusing on the birth of Saigon's political public sphere exercised through the use of print media in the 1920s, the paper I wish to present aims to reflect on an almost forgotten phenomenon which found its roots in the context determined by the 'colonial factor' exemplified by the city-port of Saigon. Within this 'space of possibilities', a complex process of imposed acculturation and social interactions led to new expressions of political consciousness, both individual and collective. This model of fertilization in turn drew from a hybrid political genealogy that mixed French republican and anarchist traditions with neo-Confucian Vietnamese behaviour. A unique blend or *metissage* thus facilitated the autonomy of individual political action and expression, and with it, the introduction into the public realm of new themes of debate. The adventures -and misadventures- of a manageable number of Vietnamese intellectuals through their political journalistic activity between 1916 till 1928, reveal the extent to which a real culture of public political diversity had become an option for many Vietnamese. It also shows how this public realm succeeded in confronting French colonial authority and in shattering any French hopes to root its legitimacy other than through force supremacy.

This example of Saigon's political public sphere in the 1920s, underlines the necessity for historians to (re)introduce methods of 'micro-history' into modern Vietnamese historiography. This phenomenon affected a limited stratum of the Vietnamese population. It is spatially circumscribed by the city and its cultural 'hinterland' Cochinchina, and bound within a clear sequence temps -from the launch of political newspapers at the end of WWI to the rise of mass-based illegal politico-militaristic revolutionary movements as new alternatives of action at the end of the 1920s. Rarely presented as more than a 'transition' towards more 'serious' and somewhat 'inevitable' later developments -forceful collective confrontation through mass-mobilization- the historical 'potential' represented by this short episode has thus been left largely unrecognized.

Rehabilitating individuals' stories in their diversity and their contradictory patterns is equally necessary for the comprehension of an historical process that was never linear or monolithic. Individuals -the first unit in the social political body that was the public political sphere- were differently affected by the transformations described above, in part due to geographical origin, age, gender, wealth and education. This resulted in a complex socio-political map of individual/collective identities reflected in the number of initiatives taken by individual

intellectual-journalists. And indeed it was the -free- choice made by some leading intellectual-journalists by the middle of the 1920s, to resort to means of action outside public colonial legality that eventually led to the slow disqualification of the public sphere of diversity as the main mode of political mediation vis-à-vis the colonial power, but also among Vietnamese themselves. A number of personalities who embodied this culture of peaceful political action –by the force of the pen- were ultimately removed -killed- by the ‘revolutionary forces’.

Attempts at privileging alternative histories in colonial Vietnam, like this phenomenon of the Saigon political public sphere, have for long been considered by many historians as a ‘diverting luxury’ against the ‘urgency’ of forging a single, linear, historical narrative. The underlying motive of such a stand is easy to appreciate: to a priori justify the events of 1945 and its revolutionary, violent, militaristic aftermath. Such a discourse mode has prevailed amid both Vietnamese and Western historians in the name respectively of the single-party regime, or out of a sense of historical guilt. At the end, it is the spectre of this one-nation-one-party linear history model that has contributed to freeze Vietnam’s modern historiography, and prevented a real debate from happening. Such a debate is already taking place in other former colonized contexts like for instance India or Algeria -countries where the state construction process is relatively recent and is the consequence of colonization. The origins of this one-sidedness could perhaps be found in the internalized legitimacy of the sacro-saint Nation-State, or Etat-Nation tradition, and its powerful self-legitimizing narrative which is equally shared by the orthodoxies of ‘neo-Confucian centralist Vietnam’, ‘neo-monarchical Republican France’, or ‘neo-messianic Imperial America’?