The Montagnards and the State in Northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975: A Historical Overview

Jean Michaud, *University of Hull*

Abstract. This article provides an overview of the recent interactions between the highlanders of northern Vietnam and the successive powers that controlled the state between 1802 and 1975: Imperial Vietnam until 1883, the French colonial state until 1954, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam after that date. Ignored for a long time, courted during wartime, subject to strong acculturation policy since the independence of the North, these highland societies are facing a constant challenge to their cultural survival.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a land of human diversity. Today ethnic Kinh, the lowland Vietnamese majority, account for approximately 85 percent of the national population. The remaining 15 percent belong to one or another of the remaining forty-eight ethnic denominations registered in the country in the 1989 census.[1] These are grouped under the appellation of *National Minorities*. Of these National Minorities twenty-four different groups are found in northern Vietnam, amounting to 62 percent of the National Minority population and 8 percent of the national population (Table 1). Their habitat is part of the northern reaches of the Annam Cordillera and includes a large portion of the southern part of the mainland Southeast Asian Massif (Figure 1).

This article provides an overview of the recent interactions between the montagnards of northern Vietnam and the successive lowland powers that controlled the state between 1802 and 1975.[2] The written documentation used in this article comes from secondary sources, either in French or English, or is translated into one of these languages from, chiefly, Vietnamese and Chinese. This documentation is in the form of archives, pub-

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Table 1. Montagnards of Northern Vietnam

Ethnonym used in this paper	Modern Vietnamese ethnonym	Number	Rank	Percentage of national minorities in the North	Percentage of total national minorities	Percentage of national population
Tho	Tày	1,190,342	1	22.7	14.0	1.8
Tai (White, Black, Red, Lue)	Thái	1,040,549	2	19.9	12.3	1.6
Muong	Muòng	914,596	3	17.5	10.8	1.4
Nung	Nùng	705,709	6	13.5	8.3	1.1
Hmong (Meo)	Méo, Hmông, H'môngg	558,053	7	10.7	6.6	0.9
Yao (Mien, Man)	Dao	473,945	8	9.0	5.6	0.7
Khmu	Kho Mù	42,853	22	0.8	0.5	~0.1
Hani	Hà Nhì	12,489	31	0.2	0.1	~0.0
Lolo	Lô Lô	3,134	40	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0
Not cited	Sán Chay, Sán Dìu, Giáy, Xinh Mun, Lào, La Chí, La Hu, Kháng, Lu, Pà Thèn, Co Lao, Bô Y, Công, Si La, and Pu Péo	296,716	—	5.7	3.5	0.5
Total		5,238,286	—	100	61.8	8.1

Note: There are twenty-four National Minority groups in the North (5,238,286 persons) out of a total forty-eight National Minority groups in the country (8,475,538), not counting the Kinh (55,900,224), for a national population of 64,375,762.
Source: Data from the 1989 census, as cited in Khong Dien 1995: 305–7.

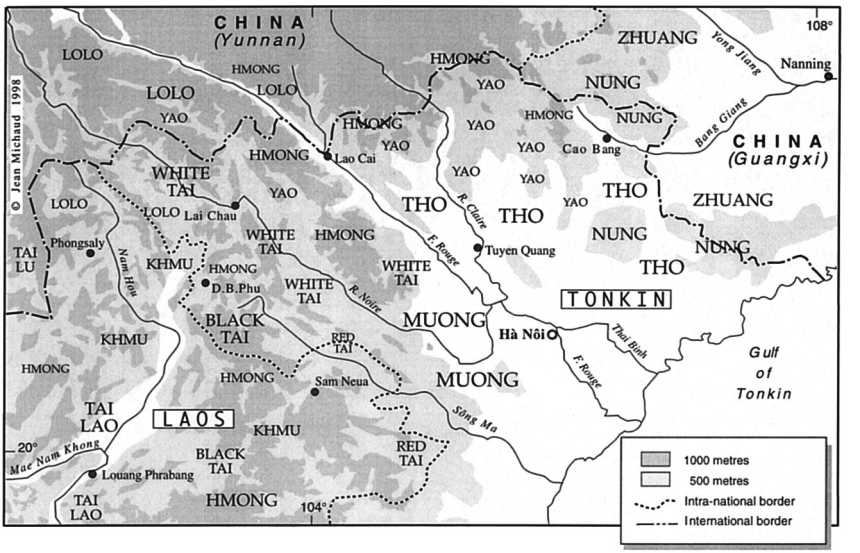

Figure 1. Localization of the main non-Kinh ethnic denominations under French rule. Size of name indicates relative demographic importance. Sources: "Carte ethnolinguistique de l'Indochine," EFEO, 1949; Lebar et al. 1964.

lic reports, monographs, and various studies, including a number of rarely cited documents published in French during the colonial era.

Many montagnards in the North do not have a written language; if they do, most have kept no written records. As a result, researching and writing the history of interactions between these societies and the outside world held little appeal for modern historians, who have often left aside this remote region and its inhabitants. For this reason but also, more recently, in connection with political secrecy that forbids most "first world" observers and researchers from conducting fieldwork in Vietnam, very little has been said about the montagnards in northern Vietnam by Western scholars. Only through broader historical studies of important regional events, such as French colonization or the Indochina Wars, have parts of their history been recorded—almost by accident, it could be said. In this essay's first sections, where precolonial and colonial times are dealt with, this article links these fragments and tries to make sense of the few mentions of these upland "primitives" whom the regional powers rarely included in their historiographies.

When addressing the final years of French Tonkin and the Communist period that immediately followed in northern Vietnam, I have also

used information gathered on location through interviews with Vietnamese officials, ethnologists, and montagnard elders. Research conducted in the North and published over the past forty-five years by Communist ethnologists, however—be they from the U.S.S.R. and its satellite countries or from China and Communist Vietnam itself—could not be thoroughly included to this research because of the language problems posed by these documents, which are yet to be translated.

This article covers a period lasting approximately 170 years—from the Nguyên consolidation in 1802 to the reunification under the Communists in 1975. Needless to say, studying such a long period in a single essay does not allow thorough discussion of all historical situations. Nonetheless, however simple this narrative may appear, it has not yet been attempted on any serious scale until this writing.[3] It is true that the other montagnards from Vietnam's Central Highlands have attracted considerable and steady attention over the past century—to the point of providing enough quality material to support theoretical constructions, notably from French anthropologists such as George Condominas (1976) and Jacques Dournes. During that same period, however, very little ethnological work has been done on the more numerous yet less accessible montagnards of northern Vietnam, where basic ethnographic information is still being collected.

Imperial Rule at Hue, 1802–1883

Very little is known about the montagnards in the Vietnamese part of the Southeast Asian Massif before the late nineteenth century. Studies of Vietnamese and Chinese archives[4]—or what is left of them—show few traces of these "politically unimportant" peoples, except when addressing ad hoc administrative and trade problems, while modern historians such as Lê Thàn Khôi (1981 [1971]: 40–47) or Ngo Gia Van Phai (1996) barely touch on them. Without indigenous written records, what is left of their early history in Vietnam is scarce. For Western scholars it was only through European testimonies that the existence of montagnard groups in the Massif began to be suspected and, to a certain extent, acknowledged. Spearheading the French takeover of northern Vietnam in the second half of the nineteenth century, occasional explorers like Francis Garnier and Ernest Doudart de Lagrée in the 1860s and Jean Dupuis and Emile Rocher in the 1870s, while rowing their way upstream into Yunnan, reported seeing tribal peoples who they generally described as being fairly primitive, colorful enough to be portrayed, and without much commercial interest.[5]

After Emperor Gia Long consolidated his power over all of Vietnam in

1802, most of the mountainous areas in the north had fallen into the court of Hue's political domain. Although it was regularly raided by looters from Yunnan and Guangxi, the high region of Bac Bo or Bac Ky (the Northern Region), Tonkin[6] (as it was officially named by the French) was generally recognized by the neighboring powers as being under Hue's administration, itself a tributary of Imperial China. Alexander B. Woodside (1971) states that soon after his installment in power, the emperor published a list of thirteen "countries" being in a tributary relation with Hue. These included Luang Phrabang and the Tran Ninh plateau in eastern Laos, but no principality in the upper reaches of the northern country. One of the rare scholars to mention the issue, Woodside (ibid.: 244) stated broadly that "in the northern provinces the Tho, the Nung, the Man, and the Mèo highlanders all lived under their own local chiefs. On occasion, these chiefs presented tribute to Huê." Supporting this statement, the provincial division of imperial Vietnam in the mid-nineteenth century, as Woodside described it, did not include any of the highlands north and west of the foothills of the upper Red River Delta.

Dang Phuong-Nghi (1969) offers additional evidence. In his study of eighteenth-century Vietnamese public institutions, he stresses that at the time the northern frontier and the peoples inhabiting it were—at least nominally—under the responsibility of the Vietnamese Ministry of the Armies (Binh Bô). The peripheral and mountainous districts they inhabited bore a specific name (*châu*) to differentiate them from the standard districts (*huyên*). In theory, both were administered by Kinh mandarins sent to live on location, called *tri-huyên* and *tri-châu*. In the northern region there were 44 such châu and 163 huyên, which indicates that a fairly large proportion of the territory was actually classified as remote. This administrative network became only marginally operational as one moved away from the lowlands, and because of the larger proportion of Kinh population in the huyên, it can be assumed that the system worked more smoothly in these districts than in the more distant châu. Ultimately, at its maximum extension its only remaining purpose was to locate existing villages, install a representative, administer the census, and try to tax the population accordingly. Consequently, the more stable groups closer to the delta, like the Tai[7]—particularly the Tho and the Nung—and the Muong, were quite heavily burdened. All the more remote and more mobile groups in the mountains largely escaped direct control.

In the northwestern highlands, for example—more precisely in the upper valley of the Black River (Sông Dà)—the Tai town of Muang Lai, present-day's Lai Chau, is known to have existed since at least the Mongol invasions in the late thirteenth century, while the loose federation of

Sip Song Chau Tai (the Twelve Tai Cantons) had been formalized around it since at least the seventeenth century. Paying tribute to Luang Phrabang at certain times, to Burma and to China at other times, it eventually came under Hue's influence. When Auguste Pavie (1947: 125) visited the area in 1887, he briefly described the ancient feudal society, stating that he had no doubt whether the Sip Song Chau Tai were then dependent on Annam. It is thus fairly certain that not only the Tho in the Clear River (Sông Lô) area closer to the delta but also the Tai of the Black River valley were paying tribute to Hue.

Whatever might have been the exact situation, historians have confirmed that by the nineteenth century Imperial Vietnamese military parties were occasionally sent into the northern mountains to restore order when caravans and trading posts were threatened by rampant banditry. This occurred especially in the second half of the century, when wandering rebel groups appeared en masse, pushing out of the Chinese periphery by insurrectional movements in Yunnan and Guangxi in particular.

The few administrative ventures under the Nguyen dynasty that had succeeded in the mountains had targeted the upper valley of the Clear River and its tributaries, while the other valleys further north and northwest were by and large left outside of this influence (Lunet de Lajonquière 1904: 133). Among the montagnards occupying the Clear River valley were the Tho (often called Tay by the French, a name the Socialist Republic of Vietnam made official in 1978, while the term *Thô* has been reallocated to a small group further south). They were the largest non-Kinh ethnic group in the region, belonging to the Tai language family and whose elite (called Thô-ti) were half Vietnamized.[8] The Tho were in regular trading contact with the lowland Kinh in the delta. The White and Black Tai, west of the Red River (Sông Hông), were more loosely connected to the central administration, less acculturated, and had fewer regular contacts with the Kinh. The Hmong (also named the Meo, Miao, H'mong), the Yao (the Man, Mien, Dao, Zao, Dzao) the Khmu (the Khamu), and the Lolo—to name but a few of the principal upland dwellers on either side of the Red River—were largely ignored or left to themselves higher in the mountains (see Figure 1).

For the specific purpose of this article, the ethnic diversity of the northern region—which amounts to more than thirty different ethnic groups and subgroups, according to some authors—is simplified along the broad ethnic categories that are found most often in the French literature from the colonial period.[9] For instance, French authors tended to confuse the Nung, an important Tai-speaking group on the Guangxi border, with the Tho, their more numerous cousins and neighbors closer to the delta. Most of the time the Red Tai and the Tai Lue on the Laotian border were mixed up with

the more numerous Black Tai, their close relatives, while some Lolo subgroups were wrongly classified in the Tai family. The Muong, often registered as Tai speakers, actually belong to the Viet-Muong linguistic branch. This early confusion of identities cannot easily be solved. It would be a hazardous enterprise with little scientific grounding, and a high risk of error, to try to decide a posteriori to which categories the groups should belong in today's ethnolinguistic classification. It therefore seemed wiser to bear with this imprecision and its colonial tone, working with the five or six principal categories most often found in the official French literature at the time.

The rivers dividing mountain ranges in the Massif, principally the Black, Clear, and Red Rivers, have long been used as commercial and military routes between Yunnan, Guangxi, and the Red River Delta. The Red River Valley, in particular, offered a passage to the invading Nan Chao troops in the ninth century, to the Yuan Mongol armies in the thirteenth century, and to various invaders from the north in the eighteenth century. Since at least the early years of the second millennium, the valley was also used as a trading route (Pluvier 1995). Although the Hue government used these natural routes for commerce with the hinterland, it did not actually control them upriver. Lao Cai ("old market")—a rudimentary settlement and trading post conveniently located on the banks of the upper Red River on the Yunnan border, known to have existed since at least the seventeenth century—was not under direct Vietnamese control. The adventurer Dupuis observed that armed groups of Cantonese merchants were installed in Lao Cai in the 1860s (McAleavy 1968: 5, 107). Even though such merchant parties conducted some local trade with the neighboring montagnard dwellers (essentially providing them with salt and metals bartered for forest products and, after the mid-nineteenth century, with raw opium), this local trade could only be marginal compared with the long haul circulation of merchandise between Yunnan and the delta. It is not likely that the merchants' influence exceeded very far outside of the immediate surroundings of the upper Red River Valley.

What exactly was the Hue policy toward the montagnards? Was it any different from the general political and economic dependency in which the Hue court, its mandarins, and their local representatives kept the peasants of the Red River Delta? Probably not. Moreover, we know that Hue's rulers did not hold the highlanders in the highest esteem, imbuing themselves with a pejorative attitude toward those "primitives" in the mountains. The Muong and the Tho, because they had with time become culturally closer to the Kinh, were considered superior to the other highland groups. With the latter "it generally was believed that familiarity held the

danger of polluting superior Vietnamese way" (Hickey 1982a: 154), and marriage of state functionaries or employees with them, for instance, was stated in the fifteenth century Lê code as punishable.

Freebooters and Migrants from the North

From the mid-nineteenth century on, because of an intensification of the social unrest of factions in southern China opposed to the Chinese state,[10] organized armed parties from various allegiances continued for fifty years or so to fiercely fight each other, to roam and loot on a large scale in Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan. Numerous troops associated until then with local warlords on the decline seized their opportunity to run away and enter the mountains of Vietnam and Laos (McAleavy 1978). Their purpose? Escaping severe military punishment in China certainly, since most of those freebooters once belonged to southern armies heavily involved in ill-fated anti-Han rebellions. The largest of these runaway bands had adorned themselves with names such as Black, Red, and Yellow Flags. Pull factors were also involved in their coming into Vietnam. The recent penetration of French missionaries and the arrival of the French troops in Tonkin had alarmed the court at Hue. For the Mandarins any help was welcome to oppose the French penetration, including rebels from China. Band leaders in the north were considered potential allies and were discretely approached several times, the most notorious occasion being when Black Flag troops rescued the Vietnamese by fighting the French entrenched in Hanoi in 1873 and killing the famous French officer Francis Garnier.

By accepting to help the Vietnamese authorities, the marauders also hoped to carve for themselves, by force if necessary, a territory where they could set up and control profitable banditry operations. The high region surrounding the Red River Delta—from where harassing the lowland settlements was an easy venture—was a perfect setting. Most operations would care to avoid head on confrontation with the Vietnamese authorities, and attacking peasant settlements newly converted to Christianity was a useful alternative agreeable to both sides.[11] But at other times the riches of the numerous trading posts, hamlets, and cities—and when circumstances and alliances permitted, even such capitals as Luang Phrabang—were looted and the Vietnamese authorities could not discipline these uneasy allies. Taking control over trading routes throughout the Massif to levy taxes on the circulation of goods was also seen as a profitable activity, especially in those remote areas where lowland state representatives rarely ventured. Before the opium trade became a major economic activity in the region, most local montagnards did not present much to attract that kind of organized banditry—those being mobile possessing only the odd silver

ingots and jewelry, while the sedentarized ones like the Tho were primarily peasants. Runaway looters from the North could nevertheless attack these less promising targets when incapable of catching a better prey, would it only be to capture women.

Henry McAleavy (1968) states that records exist depicting armed resistance against these invaders by the Tho minority dwelling between the upper Red River and the Guangxi border. Having arrived more than a millennium earlier from that same Guangxi province and stemming from the non-Han Zhuang minority, these long sedentarized agriculturists took these incursions as a major threat and reacted accordingly, although not with much military efficiency or success. The Vietnamese, to whom the Tho were then paying tribute, were called on for help and provided some troops and diplomatic support. Runaway Black and Yellow Flag troops, thus incapable of forcing a profitable deal on the Tho, eventually left that region and reached the upper Red River Valley, their ultimate target and one of the most important and potentially profitable of trading routes toward Yunnan. Their leader, Guangxi-born Liu Yin Fu, installed his headquarters in the trading post of Lao Cai, even building a fortress there.

Some montagnards from the southern Chinese fringes—fleeing famines, unrest, deadly struggles over the control of the opium trade, or Han wrath—traveled with some of the bands, seizing the opportunity to escape and enter Indochina to settle in vacant highlands they discovered on their way (Bonifacy 1904). Indeed, it is very unlikely that the thousands of "soldiers" coming from the North, whose principal penetrations into northern Vietnam were recorded both by the Chinese and the Vietnamese in the late 1860s (right after the Taiping Rebellion was crushed) and again around 1878 (at the end of the Panthai rebellion), did not include a certain proportion of mountain minorities. For instance, according to accounts given to French colonial administrators by northern Vietnamese inhabitants, the Hmong are said to have migrated en masse into these highlands while accompanying Black Flag parties around 1860.[12] It has also been recorded by French interviewers who questioned the Tho in the Clear River Valley that some of the region's more ancient montagnards were seen leaving their villages to join with the looting bands (Bonifacy 1904: 813–28). If numerous Tai did actually join forces with bandits to raid the neighboring areas, evidence is still lacking to determine whether this statement can apply to other montagnards living at higher levels in the mountains.

Some collaborative actions between long installed highlanders and occasional rebels from the North are well documented. The most notorious example involves Kam-Oum, the White Tai leader of Sip Song Chau Tai in northwestern Vietnam and his fellow inhabitants of the upper Black River

Valley. The family of his father, Kam-Seng, was originally from Guangxi and had apparently migrated into this valley in the first half of the nineteenth century to settle and assimilate with the White Tai uplanders who had resided there for centuries (Deporte 1940: 65–94). In the late 1880s the Kam family seized an opportunity to associate with the Black Flag rebels of Liu Yin Fu based in Lao Cai. The Tai troops of old Kam-Seng, under the command of the more vigourous Kam-Oum, thus grew powerful enough to take a personal revenge on the Siamese who had recently taken away Kam-Seng's three younger sons in a strategy to force the Sip Song Chau Tai rulers into paying tribute to the Chakri monarch in Krung Thep (Bangkok). A party of approximately 270 Tai and 300 Yunnanese Black Flags went on to successfully sack Luang Phrabang in 1887, though without succeeding in recovering the three prisoners (Pavie 1947: 99). On their way back the Kam family used their new strength to take over several other White and Black Tai principalities and attach them to the Sip Song Chau Tai. The Kam family was thus at the head of a large territory lying between the upper Red River Valley and the Laotian border, revolving around the towns of Muang Lai (Lai Chau) and Muang Thanh (Dien Bien Phu, meaning "site of the Border County Prefecture" in Vietnamese); thus they secured a stronger independence from the lowland Vietnamese.

As Thongchai Winichakul (1994:103) summarized, such a course of events was not unusual in those places and times: "On many occasions, Ho [Panthai Chinese, or Hui, the bulk of the Black and Yellow Flag bands] were merely a mercenary force helping one chief to attack another. In some circumstances they collaborated with a local chief to fight another alliance of Ho and local chief. The forces of the Ho and those of local chiefdoms became mingled. Many Ho Leaders became rulers and officials of local chiefdoms."

In the following years, having become a strong contender west of the Red River—but having also somehow lost the support he had long enjoyed in Guangxi—Kam-Oum skillfully managed to earn respect and obtain privileges from another anti-Vietnamese and anti-Siamese party—the newly arrived French colonists. He achieved this through a personal relationship with the diplomat Auguste Pavie, who had witnessed the Kam family's military capacities when he himself was driven out of Luang Phrabang with its monarch during the sack of 1887.[13] To win over this powerful foe to the French cause, Pavie negotiated with Siam for the liberation of the imprisoned Kam brothers; he personally escorted two of them back to Muang Thanh, where he signed with Kam-Oum (thereafter known as Deo Van Tri) a protectorate treaty on 7 April 1889. This was a shrewd, strategic move that procured long-lasting dividends for both sides (Pavie 1947:

chap. 26). The hereditary leader of the Sip Song Chau Tai was from then on referred to in French official documents as the seigneur de Lai Chau, the lord of Lai Chau, named so after the town lying at the heart of his domain.[14]

It is important to keep in mind that other Tai dwellers east of the Red River—namely the Tho and the Nung—as well as the less numerous Black and Red Tai straddling the Laotian border, were left out of this treaty. Despite their cultural closeness to the Tai of the Sip Song Chau Tai, they did not join in this French-Tai collaboration. The same is also true of most other montagnards living at higher altitudes in most of the high region.

French Indochina, 1883–1954

Politically speaking, the French colonial grip on the northern highlands, where the montagnards lived, was first officially marked in 1883 when the Hue treaty named Tonkin and Annam as French protectorates. The following year, another treaty was agreed on with Imperial China, signed in July 1885 at Tiensin after a one-year war. Suzerainty over Tonkin, as for the whole of the Vietnamese empire, was thus transferred from China, Hue's long-time overlord, to France. The treaty also gave the latter the upper hand over other European powers to build a commercial presence in Yunnan. Controlling the area spreading from the delta to the Chinese hinterland became the next high priority for the newly installed French résident supérieur au Tonkin in Hanoi. Throughout the rest of the 1880s and until the mid-1890s, France took military action and firmly occupied the Red River basin and its principal adjacent valleys through numerous and violent *missions de pacification*. All opponents were fiercely repressed, and submissive populations were rewarded. For many of the montagnards, no resistance was conceivable in the face of such a powerful foe. In fact, some factions such as the White Tai of the Sip Song Chau Tai—in connection with the Pavie episode mentioned earlier—opportunistically helped the French take over the Massif as an act of rebellion against the lowland Kinh.

For the French, during the last decade of the nineteenth century, the mountainous region of Tonkin was home to dangerous pirates from various origins. Very little was known about the montagnards living there before the French pacification. More than often these were assimilated to the roaming pirate bands. For the colonial military establishment, the northern mountains could only shelter either rebels hostile to the French occupation, more or less organized looters harrassing the local population, or massive groups of organized bandits involved in large-scale looting and trafficking (Nguyen The Anh 1993: 182). With this portrait in mind, Colonel Henry Frey (in ibid.) decided in 1891 to divide "le territoire tonkinois en

trois grandes zones correspondant aux differents modes de composition et d'organisation des bandes: 1) Zone du delta central qui ne comprend que des bandes annamites (environ 250 bandes); 2) Zone des régions limitrophes du delta où opèrent des bandes mixtes, composées d'Annamites et de Chinois; 3) Zone des hautes régions qui ne comprend que des bandes chinoises fixées à demeure ou bien des pirates chinois qui viennent à des périodes déterminées y faire des incursions." ["Tonkin in three areas in relation to the mode of composition and organization of the bands: (1) the central Delta zone, which only includes Viet bands (around 250 bands); (2) the Delta periphery zone, with mixed bands of Viet and Chinese; (3) the Upland zone with permanent or occasional Chinese bands only."]

Until the end of the nineteenth century, only Annamites (Kinh) and Chinois were acknowledged by the French as important ethnic identities in the high region; "primitive" tribals were known to reside there but they were considered not worth taking into account or were classed with other looters and bandits. Moreover, in 1891, to avoid what military authorities described as a possible "contamination" from the highlands into the lowlands—clearly indicating that not so much mere pirates were feared but also political opponents to the colonial project—the complete separation of the mountainous region from the delta was promulgated and a demarcation line was installed separating the two areas, adorned with a number of blockhouses and permanent troops. The high region was subdivided in four *territoires militaires* along the main sectors of pirate activities, and these were given to the military high command to administrate. From outposts installed in the mountains, the French influence spread, using strategies such as organizing local montagnards as counterguerrillas to fight the pirates (ibid.: 183). At last, some montagnards had finally been identified and studied, and this strategic information was put to use by the military commanders.

The Opium Factor

One regional economic and political factor must be examined at this point, as it helps to understand a large part of the specific relationship the French set up and maintained with Tonkin's montagnards. When the French asserted their domination over Tonkin, many of the highland minorities of southwestern China and the upper reaches of northern Vietnam were opium producers. They had been induced into this cash crop by the Chinese in the nineteenth century to help the Middle Empire compete with the Europeans, who controlled the massive opium trade from India into China. This uneven trade caused for the latter a huge deficit in its international commercial balance, to say nothing of the adverse effects of having

millions of its subjects addicted to smoking and eating opium (Wang 1933; McCoy et al. 1989; and Gernet 1997 (1982): 534–42). Ironically though, the South China montagnards were also being pushed into opium cultivation by the recently installed French and British, who were able to reach the southern parts of the Massif through the valleys leading north from Burma and French Indochina. The French-built Yunnan-Tonkin railway connecting Haiphong in the Red River Delta to Yunnan Foo (Kunming) in Yunnan, completed in 1910, was one transportation infrastructure of major importance in this scheme. In French Indochina the state-owned Régie Générale de l'Opium de l'Indochine was in charge of a highly profitable trade and transformation industry.[15] Its representatives needed and managed to maintain good relationships with the mountain dwellers in the upper Massif, the main producers, and with the various Tai groups in the high valleys, the middlemen in the opium trade with the delta. So profitable was this trade and so important the sums it entailed, that the control over opium production and circulation was in itself an issue worth fighting for. To help appreciate the size of the stakes, Chantal Descours-Gatin (1992) has recently shown that between 1898 and 1922, the contribution from the industry of opium to the total gross income of the colony's budget in French Indochina fluctuated between 25 percent and 42 percent.[16] To translate this contribution into practical terms, it has been estimated that at the time of the First Indochina War, if all the opium produced in one year in Tonkin had fallen into the Viet Minh's hands, it would have been sufficient to equip its entire regular army forces of 1952 (six divisions) with arms supplied through barter with southern China arms dealers (McAlister 1967).

French Agency and the Montagnards in Tonkin

Most analysts have described French minority policy for the mountainous regions of French Indochina as a colonial divide-and-rule policy guided by ad hoc considerations (Salemink 1995: 262), aimed at protecting metropolitan economic interests and keeping the highlands and their populations under loose but steady control. As Clive J. Christie (1996: 90) sees it, "France's policy towards the Montagnards depended on their policy towards Vietnam. If France decided to negotiate with the forces of Vietnamese nationalism, then its special relationship with the Montagnards would necessarily be sacrificed. If, on the other hand, the French strategy was based on a denial of Vietnamese national unity and an attempt to encourage the political fragmentation of Vietnam, then the special relationship with the Montagnards would become a key part of that strategy."

Here, as under the Hue rulers, the French did not have any definite policy regarding the montagnards of Tonkin in particular, apart perhaps

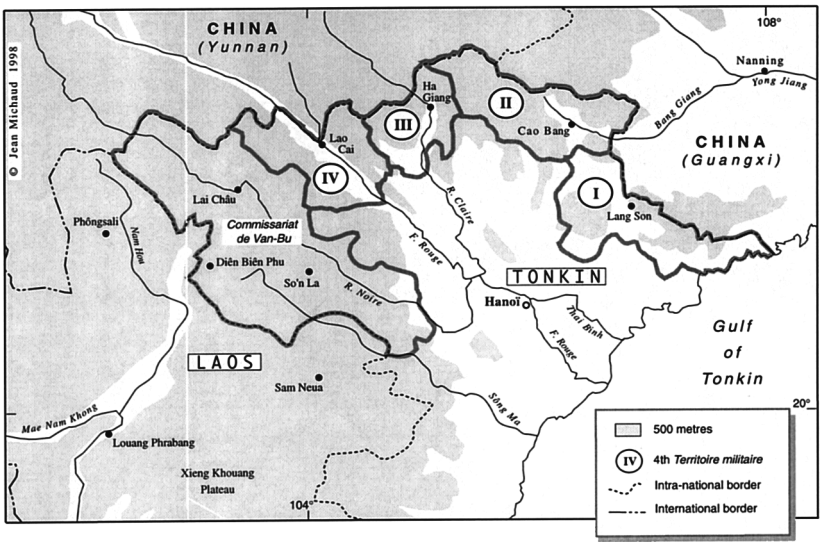

Figure 2. The military territories in 1903. Source: Annuaire général 1903.

from making circumstances favorable for the growing of poppies and the production and trade of opium. From 6 August 1891 on, as was mentioned earlier, most of the montagnards in the North were living under the strict jurisdiction of the military territories, spread along the Chinese border and into northeastern Laos after 1908, where they were subject to civil and military administration under an *officier supérieur* reporting directly to the résident supérieur au Tonkin (Figure 2).[17]

At that time it was considered that the pacification of the mountainous regions of Tonkin could not be achieved unless civil and military powers were united. In this regard again, French colonial administration of the frontiers and their inhabitants much resembled that of the châu by its predecessors, the Nguyen. If a dispute occurred between montagnards and lowlanders, or between montagnards and French citizens, the French officer in charge of that particular military territory, generally with the grade of commandant, would act as a judge and his decision would be enforced by the troops whenever necessary. He would be empowered with all the normal administrative and judicial attributions of a civil resident and he would report to the général commandant supérieur for military affairs (Teston and Percheron 1932: 254–55). In disputes between montagnards, if ever the case was to be taken beyond the village scene, the commandant would deal with it in the least intrusive way, to be involved as little as possible. There-

fore, the social peace in any specific region depended heavily on the personal relationship between local officers and administrators, the Kinh in the vicinity, and the local montagnard leaders or elders.

For these same French rulers, as was alluded to earlier, political control of the highlanders also required gaining knowledge of their traditions and forms of social organization. In the 1890s and the 1900s French military troops based in garrisons and outposts in each of the military territories, following orders from the high command, began to collect massive data on montagnard traditions and social organizations. Major figures like diplomat Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis (1892), Commandant and later Lieutenant-Colonel Louis-M. Auguste Bonifacy (1919), Commandant Etienne-Edmond Lunet de Lajonquière (1904) and his colleagues Lieutenant-Colonel Diguet (1908), Commandant Révérony, and Capitaine Fesch produced detailed ethnographies of the populations inhabiting the vast areas under their command. It must be emphasized that despite the military background of these early observers and the obvious issue of security lying behind this ethnographic operation, the writings of these officers are remarkably free from exacerbated ethnocentrism and latent racism that characterized Western *mission civilisatrice* at the time. For example, a tireless ethnographer and writer such as Bonifacy went as far as learning vernacular languages and systematically investigating customs, religion, and rituals, providing a unique set of reliable firsthand data on montagnard cultures, including numerous interviews, translations, sketches, and photographs. To France's credit, it must be said that colonial archives also show, through the routine correspondence between officers in outposts and their regional authorities, that French administrators were at times siding with the underdog when judging a local dispute between French colonists or Annamites (Kinh) on one side and montagnards on the other.[18] Whether this favorable attitude was merely a symptom of France's policy of division among the Indochinese population (as suggested by Christie or Oscar Salemink, in this case supporting montagnards against Vietnamese) cannot be doubted broadly speaking; however, the proof of French colonial representatives' humanity toward highland populations in the North often seemed to go beyond the normal requirements of their administrative duty. It might also simply reflect a sympathy that perhaps tended to develop between largely peaceful and welcoming "primitives" and their new masters, who for some time had to share with them the hardships of highland climate and isolation.[19]

The other main colonial contribution to the knowledge of montagnards in French Tonkin comes from the Catholic missionaries affiliated with the Société des missions étrangères de Paris. Since the early seven-

teenth century, Catholic missionaries of various denominations had been present in Vietnam, though on a small scale. It was during the nineteenth century and the colonial installment that their presence became more important. Spearheading, it has been said, the French takeover of Vietnam, Catholic vicariats headed by bishops nominated by the Office de la propagande in Rome founded numerous missions in the delta (carved out of the old Tonkin vicariate were the Tonkin Méridional and Tonkin Occidental vicariates in 1846), then in the high region (Haut-Tonkin in 1895), and finally on the coastal area (Tonkin Maritime in 1901), the last two vicariates born from the subdivision of the Tonkin Occidental. Of these, the Haut-Tonkin vicariate, with its headquarters at Hung-hoa, is the one where most of the mountains and the montagnards were located (to the exception of the western foothills, where the Muong lived, and the highlands of Nghe-an province along the Laotian border).

Before the establishment of the Haut-Tonkin vicariate in 1895, only a few missionaries had ventured in the mountains to scout for potential converts, most of whom were still branded *tribus sauvages* and lived in the lower Black and Clear River valleys. Their field reports are short and fairly factual but can hardly support ethnological analysis.[20] In the 1880s in particular, the French conquest of north Vietnam caused many mandarins faithful to Hue to stimulate resistance and rebellion in the northern mountains. Puginier, then bishop of Tonkin Occidental and Hanoi and quite involved in colonial politics, had understood how mandarins in the hills managed to use wandering troops from China to fight the French and harrass the few Christian settlements his congregation had founded beyond the delta. A skilled diplomat, he knew how to convince the colonial authorities to support his missionary efforts: he actively promoted the development of permanent missionary outposts in the mountains as the best way to avoid collusion between Annamite local chiefs, Chinese bandits, and local montagnards.[21] Within fifteen years, by 1910, the Haut-Tonkin vicariate included 115 Christian settlements scattered in the mid- and high regions.

A few dozen French missionaries were permanently fixed in these missions, where they prioritized learning the vernacular languages and studying the local customs. They left an important body of correpondance that still waits to be analyzed. Some of these missionaries also published their observations, and several produced language dictionaries for their younger colleagues to follow them in the field. The most famous of them was perhaps François Marie Savina who over thirty years wrote several dictionaries, a major ethnography of the Miao (Hmong)—whom he had observed

for several years in his Chapa mission as well as in Guizhou—and a number of reports to the colonial authorities concerning specific security issues.

In terms of state services throughout the French period, and especially education and health facilities under the Direction de l'instruction publique and the Services sanitaires et médicaux, it is generally true that the services reaching even remote villages in the lowland did not really go beyond that point. The montagnards received only a tiny fraction of the overall budget for education, most of which was directed at the Tai groups in the locations closest to the Kinh settlements (Direction des affaires 1935: 61). A map of 1931 showing the density of school students across French Indochina bears the mention *sans école* (no school) for most of the higher region of Tonkin, while the immediately lower region was rated "less than 1 pupil per 10 square km," as opposed to more than fifty times that density in the delta (Direction générale 1931). The language barrier was certainly a major obstacle, but here again the people at the periphery were receiving more than their share of military and missionary attention, and hardly anything else.

For the rest of the first half of the twentieth century—a period interspersed with a major economic crisis with repercussions in the colonies, World War II, the Japanese occupation, and with the First Indochina War starting in 1946—detailed study of the French administration in Indochina that had an impact on the montagnards of Tonkin has still not been conducted. Results could be meager, however. Outside of the moments of crisis such as the open war with the Viet Minh forces, the montagnards were not paid much attention between 1910 and 1945; proportionate scarcity in French official archives reflects this.[22]

Wartime Alliances

In addition to controlling opium transformation and trade, political issues in the mountains of Tonkin eventually came down to the tackling of the growing unrest fomented by Vietnamese Nationalists and Communists. Dwelling at lower altitudes than the more recent montagnard migrants like the Hmong and the Yao, the various Tai groups were more accessible to political influences from the lowlands than their upland neighbors. The Tho and the Nung, east of the Red River, were among the most important highland minority groups in northern Vietnam. Among the Tho of the Clear River area in particular, as a result of their more advanced "Kinhization," the majority accordingly took a stance of resistance to the French invaders and sided with the Vietnamese Nationalists and later with the Communists. The French succeeded in allying firmly with the White and to some

extent the Black Tai in the Sip Song Chau Tai. Several of these long sedentarized Tai groups had a stratified social and political organization with landlords and peasants. For the French then, as for the Vietnamese rulers at Hue before, that traditionally stable structure served as a chain of command for the colonial central institutions, thanks to the close relationship established with leader Deo Van Tri and several of his sons.[23]

From 1946 on, the Tho were the chief montagnard enemy of the French throughout the First Indochina War, as a Tho revolt in 1940 indicated, while the White Tai were their main montagnard ally. The White Tai proved their loyalty by helping French runaway troops under General Alessandri flee into Yunnan when pursued by the Japanese in spring 1945. This plurality of tendencies between linguistically and culturally related Tai groups was possible not only because of cultural differences between various Tai subgroups, but also because of the particular political organization of Tai society, traditionally divided in *muang* (principalities), each one with its own rightful leader.[24] Because of this close relationship with the White Tai, and in reaction to the proclamation of independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam by the Viet Minh in September 1945, swiftly followed by the takeover of a large chunk of the mountainous part of eastern Tonkin in Tho territory, a French-Tai temporary accord was worked out and quickly enforced. Discussions about the eventual creation of an autonomous Moi territory in the Central Highlands were also being conducted, much for the same strategic motives (Christie 1996: 90–91). In an attempt to cling onto the highlands, an accord was finally promulgated in July 1948, creating an independent Tai Federation inside the Union française, a Federation grouping together the provinces of Lai Chau, Phong Tho, and Son La under the presidency of the Tai leader Deo Van Long, the heir of Deo Van Tri. At the same time, "while the White and Black Tai were welcoming the French Colonial Army on its return from Chinese exile in 1945–46, Thô guerrilla units were helping the Viet Minh to take over Hanoi" (McAlister 1967: 795–96), and by the end of the 1940s the Tho were giving their unlimited support to the Viet Minh.

The legal status of the *sous-minorités* (subminorities) inside the Tai Federation, essentially the Hmong and the Yao but also significant numbers of the Austro-Asiatic Khmu and the Tibeto-Burman Lolo, was claimed to be one of *adhésion de fait* (de facto inclusion) (Nollet 1953: 43). In a dominant position long before the French arrived, the White Tai of the Black River, despite being outnumbered by 50 percent by the Hmong inside the borders of the federation (McAlister 1967: 817), took advantage of the French support to exploit those subminorities landlocked in the upper

reaches of the territory even more, particularly in taking control over the highly profitable opium trade (ibid.: 782).[25] Benefits were quickly returned to the Tai in the federation more than ever before: Modern European arms flowed in, local military recruits were regularly paid, Lai Chau was made a small fortress, and teaching in Tai language and script was swiftly organized from Hanoi with the help of the Ecole française d'Extrême Orient. No other minority population in that region enjoyed such privileges, and bitterness soared accordingly among neighbors. With the rapid development of Viet Minh activities in upper Tonkin at the end of the 1940s came a clear crystallization: the federated Tai drew closer to the French while, understandably, other montagnards exploited by the former sided with the communists and challenged the might of the Tai rulers from within their own federation. For reasons discussed earlier, the Tho around the upper Clear River Valley also opposed the French. There, some of the Yao montagnards followed the Tho in this choice, while others, using much the same reasoning as their cousins landlocked in the Tai Federation, opted for the French instead. In short, as John T. McAlister (1967: 819) summarized: "Because of their traditional antagonism toward the Tho, the Meo [Hmong] *east* of the Red River fought tenaciously against the Viet Minh. . . . In contrast to this situation east of the Red River, the Viet Minh in the northwest were not allied with the traditional enemies of the Meo but were fighting them. This was the initial advantage to Viet Minh ambitions for receiving Meo support."

Numerous Hmong and Yao east of the upper Red River, particularly around Ha Giang and Pa Kha (today Bac Ha), helped by others in Than Uyen and Chapa (today Sa Pa) west of that same river, thus opposed the Viet Minh and supported the French in guerrilla operations against Viet Minh bases in upper Tonkin. A number of pro-French Hmong and Yao in 1950 had been formalized into the Groupement de commandos mixtes aéroportés (GCMA, or the Composite Airborne Commando Group) scheme by the French Service action under Colonel Roger Trinquier with some help from the American Central Intelligence Agency, and subsequently GCMA guerrillas repeatedly harassed Viet Minh positions in the mountains.[26] Between December 1952 and July 1954 twenty-five such military operations were conducted, most of which involved montagnard guerillas.[27] Some of the better organized commando operations of 1953, such as a successful attack launched on the twin towns of Coc-Leu and Lao Cai in that October, eventually made it necessary that the Viet Minh ask for Communist Chinese troops to cross the border from Yunnan and help crush the "rebels." They did so successfully more than once (Gras 1992 [1977]: 478).

The Dien Bien Phu plateau and town had been acknowledged by the French to be part of the Tai Federation, and therefore the region was falling into White Tai Deo Van Long's domain. The upland valleys that the plateau controlled were a strategic gateway to the valley of the Nam Hou River in Laos, the most direct route to Luang Phrabang. The area was also the most agriculturally productive one of the federation, both for rice and opium. Nonetheless, traditional sovereignty over Dien Bien Phu and its riches was claimed by Black Tai leaders installed in its surroundings as well as in the Son La area, on whom the lord of Lai Chau's supremacy had been imposed by the colonial powers. Deo Van Long thus quite simply removed the local Black Tai leader, Lo Van Hac, and installed his own son in Lo Van Hac's place. The staunch French support to this sort of White Tai hegemonic power over Dien Bien Phu proved an insensitive attitude and contributed to alienating the Black Tai to the colonial cause. Their main leaders joined Lo Van Hac and retaliated by defecting to the Viet Minh in the early 1950s (Fall 1967: 24). The French committed still another blunder in their frantic preparation for what they rightly thought—although for tragically wrong reasons—would be the ultimate confrontation with the Vietnamese Communists. After the French high command in Hanoi had chosen the coveted Dien Bien Phu plateau for their final showdown and swiftly gained it back from the Viet Minh in late 1953 (this was known as the Castor operation), they then decided to abandon the less well-defended Lai Chau and to repatriate its inhabitants to Dien Bien Phu; this was the Pollux operation, which, as its name indicates, could not be dissociated from Castor. As a token of respect for their longtime ally, Général René Cogny went in person to summon Deo Van Long and the White Tai to abandon their traditional capital and settle where the battle was to be fought. The majority of the regular troops were airlifted from Lai Chau to Dien Bien Phu, but the Tai irregulars had to fight their way through the Viet Minh–controlled jungle. Meeting there with fierce opposition, a majority of these irregulars and their French noncommissioned officers never made it to the plateau (Muelle, 1999). Deo Van Long himself was flown to Hanoi with his court and all the wealth he could carry; he never again saw his kingdom, which had come to an abrupt and disgraceful end.

This poor political decision, for which the French high command must bear primary responsibility, can only be explained by the sheer ignorance of local cultures that characterized the freshly arrived top brass. It alienated most Federated Tai, who quite rightly took this forced relocation as a humiliation and who as a matter of consequence were to support the French war effort only half-heartedly while nevertheless providing, along with a few representatives of other montagnard groups, nearly one-quarter

of the French troops on location when the battle of Dien Bien Phu started. Many retreated to the mountains or simply defected to the Viet Minh, who were "adept at exploiting the ethnic and clan tensions that lay beneath the surface of the apparent harmony of the T'ai Federation" (Christie 1996: 94).[28] This was a fatal mistake, one of a few equally fatal decisions made by French military strategists in this particular venture. When the battle of Dien Bien Phu finally took place in spring 1954, many Black Tai from Son La and many White Tai, Hmong, Yao, and Khmu from the Sip Song Chau Tai, not counting the Thos and other montagnards from east of the Red River who had enrolled in the Viet Minh's forces, had made themselves available to the Communists. By the thousands they helped to build and support this massive and totally unpredicted artillery pounding, encircling and undermining of the French entrenched camp; they were ultimately a decisive factor in tilting the balance in favor of General Vo Nguyen Giap's armies.

As Bertrand De Harting (1996: 415) stated when analyzing Viet Minh success, neither the independence of 1945 nor the Dien Bien Phu victory would have been possible without support from the minorities. It is surprising, however, that despite the fact that the montagnard contribution to the battle is attested by numerous observers, official Vietnamese historiography only reluctantly acknowledges this contribution. For example, Bernard Fall (1967: 6–7) mentions "the Trung-Doan Doc-Lap (Independent Regiment) 148, a crack unit of the Viet-Nam Peoples Army specializing in mountain warfare and recruited from extremely well trained tribesmen from the area." Giap's published account of the battle barely mentions the ethnonym *Tai*, and this one only. I interviewed a general staff colonel (Michaud 1997) who took part in the battle, and against all logic he vehemently negated any non-Kinh participation in the battle. As this kind of rhetoric indicates, Viet Minh fighters at Dien Bien Phu had above all to be Vietnamese.

Communist Rule in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam until Reunification, 1954–1975

Reliable information on what happened in the mountains of northern Vietnam in the years immediately after Dien Bien Phu is scarce. If Vietnamese archives have been produced and collected on the northern highlands during that time, which is not at all certain, they have not been made available. For understandable security reasons, the region was virtually sealed off from the outside world. The frantic atmosphere of the postvictory period allowed fierce foes to retaliate on some scale. There were nearly no out-

side witnesses to record the exaction, civil administration and police forces were practically nonexistent, and the montagnard oral tradition today is still extremely discreet on that period.[29]

What is known is that immediately after the July 1954 cease-fire, montagnards who collaborated with the French had to try to move out as soon as possible. Several White and Black Tai families who had sufficient means fled to neighboring Laos; some people eventually fled to France, as did Deo Van Long, the last lord of Lai Chau. Next fled Hmong and Yao families, chiefly from east of the Red River. GCMA and GMI guerillas who were left behind were advised by their French patrons to fall back to Laos, south of the seventeenth parallel, or to try to reach Haiphong before the "bamboo curtain" was to fall. But leaving kin to face possible reprisals was an option most montagnards would not readily choose, and many of those who could not take relatives along decided to stay. Pro-French montagnards who remained in Tonkin were then to silently merge with their nonfighting countrymen or to fight until ammunition dried out, as no more supplies would arrive by air. A small number of French troops who still believed in the possibility of a reversal of fortune had remained with the montagnards, and the last recorded radio message from a French noncommissioned officer in the Tonkin jungle was received two years after the cease-fire.

Meanwhile, victorious Viet Minh troops were busy crushing the remaining opposition. Fall (1964 [1961]: 278–79) reported that according to the Vietnamese weekly *People's Army* of September 1957, "from July 1954 to April 1956, [Viet Minh] forces in the mountain areas east of the Red River had, 'in spite of great difficulties and hardship,' killed 183 and captured 300 'enemy soldiers,' while inducing the surrender of 4,336 tribesmen and capturing 3,796 weapons. . . . By 1959, the struggle was over. The mountaineers were thoroughly purged of all 'reactionary' elements and whatever Frenchmen there had been left among them were now dead or captured." In his four-volume analysis of the post-Geneva years in Vietnam, Ken Post (1989: 56) pushed the end date even further by stating that "followers of a self styled [Hmong] 'King,' Vang A Bau, seem to have held out until the end of the 1960s" with the help of old arms initially provided by the French.

Unlike the rulers that preceded them, the new leaders in charge in North Vietnam had a clear public policy toward the montagnards. The victorious Communists were quick to try to consolidate the political gains they had made among the various and traditionally disunited montagnards of the high region. In close connection with the national project of agrarian reform, but also as a form of political alternative for the upper northern region (De Hartingh 1996: 414), a Tai-Meo Autonomous Region (later re-

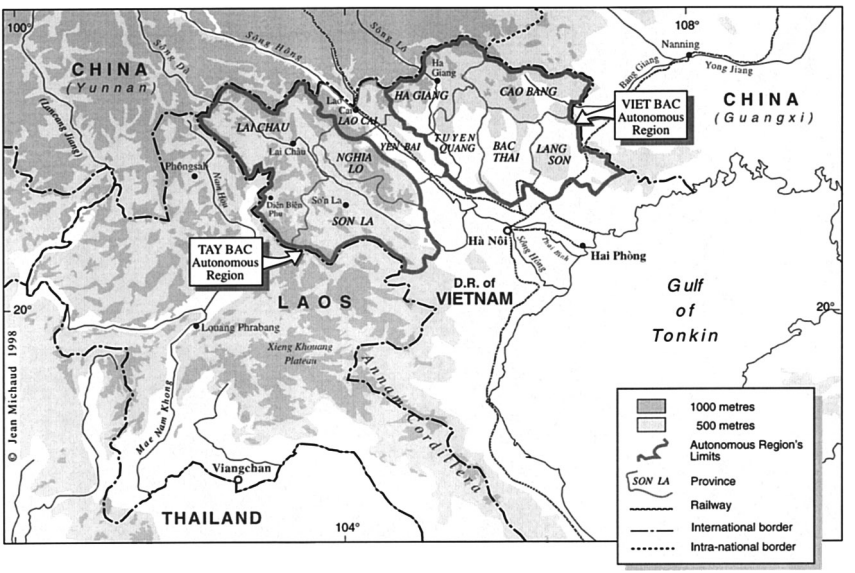

Figure 3. Tay Bac and Viet Bac Autonomous Regions in 1965. Sources: Post 1989 3: 15; Fall 1960: 63.

named Tay Bac, meaning "northwest," to better represent the ethnic diversity of the groups it encompassed) was created in 1955, followed a year later by the Viet Bac Autonomous Region, both enjoying on paper important privileges in terms of cultural rights and self-government. In G. V. R. Moseley's (1973: 157–58) words,

> A decree concerning the establishment of autonomous areas in the DR of Vietnam had been issued on April 29, 1955. On May 7, 1955, there came into being the Tai-Meo Autonomous Region, the name of which was subsequently changed to Tay Bac Autonomous Region. The Tay Bac AR embraces an area equivalent to three provinces in the mountains between the Red River valley and the Laotian frontier. On the north, it borders on Yunnan province. Its area of over 36,000 square kilometers is one-fifth that of the entire area of the DR of Vietnam; its population of 500,000 includes 25 different nationalities, the most important of which are the Thai (T'ai) and Meo (Miao).[30]

The 1960 Constitution in Vietnam brought additional precision to this creation by indicating that, along with the administrative division of the country into provinces and districts, the Autonomous Regions (Figure 3)

would be considered on the same level as the municipalities like Hanoi or Haiphong and would fall directly under the authority of the central state. There was little doubt concerning the underlying political ideology supporting this reorganization of large chunks of the territory. As De Harting (1996: 410) pointed out: "La plupart des dispositifs mis en place en Haute-Région par le régime étaient de fait à double sens. Ils contribuaient bien sûr au développement de ces zones reculées et de leurs habitants. Mais ils servaient aussi à agréger des sociétés très diverses à la société kinh, et à travers cette agrégation à faire triompher la révolution marxiste-léniniste sur l'ensemble du territoire vietnamien." [Most plans of action implemented in the High Region by the regime were double-sided. They contributed to the development of these remote areas and their inhabitants and to attaching these diverse societies to Kinh society, and thus making the Marxist-feminist revolution a triumph across the whole of the Vietnamese territory.]

The setting up of additional Autonomous Regions was also planned, but this strategy did not survive the turmoil of the Second Indochina War and was not considered of any use after the Communists' final victory and the country's reunification in 1975.[31] The political strategy behind this apparent recognition of the montagnards' right to some level of self-determination had been directly borrowed from Communist China's minority policy. "The provisions of the 1960 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam regarding the status of national minorities are virtually identical with those of the Popular Republic of China Constitution. They provide for equality and autonomy within a unified, multinational state" (Moseley 1973: 157). In turn, the Chinese policy for setting up Autonomous Regions originated in the Soviet Union. In principle, "Stalin's identification of four basic criteria for a nationality—common language, common territory, common economic life, and common culture—[was] the basis of all thinking about the nature of a nationality in the PRC" (MacKerras 1994: 11). In his study of minority policy in twentieth-century China, David M. Deal (1971: 1) has somewhat brutally but rather clearly shown that "although the Nationalists in theory advocated assimilation and the communists advocated cultural pluralism, they both in fact carried out a policy of assimilation."

Promises of ethnic independence made early in the Chinese revolutionary war were quickly removed after the 1949 victory to be replaced by a more manageable policy of "regional autonomy." All through the 1950s and well into the 1960s, numerous Autonomous Regions were set up in southwestern China in particular, some of them tightly overlapping with one ethnic minority concentration, but most of them encompassing several

ones of dissimilar numerical importance while sometimes splitting others between several adjacent Autonomous Regions and provinces. Despite the rhetoric proclaiming the right to self-government in the Autonomous Regions, these were seen as areas to be controlled and populated with Han Chinese migrants, considered to be the best long-term strategy to definitively take over these peripheries. In the meantime, in theory at least, minorities there could enjoy a high degree of self-determination and were sending deputies to provincial and national governments; in reality, only party cadres drilled outside their region of origin who had become "revolutionary" could participate in the decision-making process. Any local decision that was deemed incompatible to the people's interest could be overthrown at a higher political level.

This Chinese model was largely based on the experience learned from the Soviet Union and was implemented locally with only a few adjustments. As Richard K. Diao (1967: 171–73) has analyzed in the People's Republic of China, in the U.S.S.R., and later in Communist Vietnam, the minorities were in fact expected to conform to the credo of the Marxist economic evolution model. All the way down from Marx via Lenin and Stalin, the strict Marxist grid of economic evolution—from primitive communism to feudalism, then to capitalism and finally to socialism—was believed and implemented to the letter. Once this was accepted as an immanent truth, the montagnards in Vietnam, either inhabiting the Central Highlands or the northern mountains, were in general considered to be at the lowest stage of economic development or, at best, early into the second stage, while the Kinh (considered the enlightened majority) was entering the highest stage. All that the "socialist man" could do for the "traditional man" was to "help" him relinquish his primitiveness and reach as quickly as possible the superior level of civilization of the lowlanders, at all costs and against his will if necessary (Dang Nghiem Van 1989: 263, quoted in Evans 1992: 116–47). In a new country where the collective project has to be popular, national, and scientific, there was little room left for the ways of the past. Following this frame of mind, and despite an openly egalitarian state rhetoric, montagnards were considered culturally and economically backward unless they accepted the cultural supremacy of the lowland majority. A fine illustration of this patronizing policy, a nearly caricatural one by its simplicity and its lack of nuance, was given by Viet Chung (1968). It is worth devoting a few paragraphs to this instructive piece of propaganda.

After a few words on the flaws, such as famine, diseases, ignorance, and cultural extinction that plagued the "colonial night," Viet Chung states that the "light of Marxism" began to shine early with the resolutions of the party's First National Congress in 1935. There, in the advent of a commu-

nist power governing Vietnam, the right to self-determination for minority peoples was to be granted, meaning: "to choose between adhering to the Union of Indochinese Soviet Republics and proclaiming itself a separate state. The soviet government of the workers, peasants and soldiers of Indochina will in no way interfere or create obstacle" (ibid.: 12).[32] More precisely, when the Union will come into being, "each nationality of the Union will enjoy, in addition, the right to autonomy, that is, the right to solve local affairs, to use its mother tongue in its political, economic and cultural life, and to choose its own leaders in political and economic affairs" (ibid.: 12). In 1945 at the unilateral proclamation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the actual exercise of power suddenly made the national leaders-to-be more circumspect and less idealistic than when allies were to be sought and hopes kept high. The 1946 Constitution of Vietnam refers for the first time to the Marxist evolutionist credo when stating that "the national minorities will also receive assistance in all fields so as to attain the general level within a short time" (ibid.: 15). Five years later, at the heart of the struggle against the French and when final victory seemed possible, thanks to the backing of Communist China, the earlier political permissivity toward the minorities no longer fit the balance of contingent compromises required to push forward the national cause. The Second National Congress of the party began to part with the strict Komintern line to move toward the Chinese position. The wide liberties that were foreseen for the minorities in 1935 became restricted, their role was presented in a more passive stance, and their welfare was to be more strongly centrally planned. New statements in the Constitution included: "We shall see to the improvement of the living standards of the minority peoples, help them to make progress in all fields, and safeguard their rights to take part in the direction of state affairs and use their own language at school" (ibid.: 13), hardly a novelty though, the French and the South Vietnamese having also shared this point of view in their own time (Christie 1996).

Indeed, in 1955, Ho Chi Minh, when inaugurating the first Autonomous Region, summarized the issue as he saw it at that time. He declared: "The Thai-Meo Autonomous Region is an integral part of the great family of Viet-Nam, making with other brother nationalities a monolithic bloc of unity. It will always enjoy the education and the leadership of the Party and Government and the assistance of other brother nationalities" (Ho Chi Minh 1955: 260–62, quoted in Connor 1984: 115).

Then, adding a final touch to the promotion of monolithic unity, the decisive setback came with the amended Constitution of 1960 in the free Democratic Republic of Vietnam, with statements such as: "Autonomous zones may be established in areas where people of national minorities live

in compact communities. Such autonomous zones are integral and inalienable parts of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam" (Viet Chung 1968: 16). The supporting ideological principles are then expressed as clearly as possible: "Helping the uplands catch up with the lowlands, the border regions with the central regions, the minority peoples with the Kinh (majority) people, and urging all the nationalities to further develop their revolutionary spirit and great capacities and to unite closely so as to advance towards socialism" (ibid.: 18).

Thus the die was cast. Progress strictly relating to advancing toward socialism, it did not come as a surprise when Viet Chung, on behalf of the party, went on to celebrate the appearance of the first industrial bases and the birth of a local working class among ethnic minorities. People there had also reached, he said, the initial stage of a mercantile economy of a socialist character, superstitions have receded considerably, while sorcerers and charlatans had renounced their practices and were looking back at them with utter shame. Facing this "success," it could then safely be claimed that "people's power has done everything it can to restore and develop the spiritual and moral values of the minorities, [and contributed] to renovating the age-old life of the minority peoples" (ibid.: 20–21).[33]

When Autonomous Regions were finally dismantled in 1975, the discourse had gone full circle and proven its own vacuity. As Walker Connor (1984: 119) summarized, "The haste with which Hanoi acted [in abolishing Autonomous Regions] demonstrates the showcase role that the autonomous regions had been designed to play for the montagnards outside of northern Vietnam, and the absence of sincerity underlying the promises of independence and/or autonomy made to the minorities of both northern and southern Vietnam since the very beginning of the Vietnamese Marxist-Leninist movement."

Despite crude rhetorics being overwhelmingly dominant in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam between 1954 and 1975, traces of autocritique by Vietnamese officials can also be found, though very rarely in the form of public admission. One such rare occasion involved party official Chu Van Tan and a theoretical article published in 1960 in an official Vietnamese journal, a typical piece of communist flagellation, which Post (1989 2: 279) reported as follows:

> Cadres were thus told of the mishandling of policy on nationalities by some of their number, to such an extent that the Kinh and larger minority groups (the Thai and Nung were specifically named) were often guilty of "great nationality chauvinism" towards the smaller. They were guilty of applying "the principle of exploitation and dis-

> dain for the backward nationalities," which "solves the problem of the relations between nationalities in an unequal way." In consequence, in a kind of chain reaction, "a small nationality looks down on a smaller nationality and conversely does not have a friendly cooperation with the larger nationalities."

This reflects a clear admission that in the mountains, very little indeed had changed since the time of Imperial Vietnam.

Epilogue

While busy with the reunification war in the 1960s and the early 1970s, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had little time for reviewing its policy on minorities. It essentially maintained its patronizing attitude, leaving little possibility for nonbiased fieldwork research and observation of the mountain minorities. Grant Evans (1985) showed that communist anthropology in Vietnam from 1975 to 1985 closely followed the Soviet ethnological tradition and was still heavily tainted with the Marxist economic evolution theory. Winning the war had not significantly altered the general policy toward the northern montagnards. After 1975, Vietnamese ethnographic research was limited by the party to "categorising and providing selective descriptive ethnographies" (Evans forthcoming), an exercise that culminated in the elaboration of a list of fifty-four official national minorities in the country published in 1979 (this number was actually reduced to forty-nine in 1989).[34] When Doi Moi (the renovation) was launched in 1986, the montagnards were left at the margin of the main changes brought to the lowland majority. But at last, collectivization, which never took off convincingly in the mountainous areas, was abandoned and the highlanders were allowed to enter the economic competition on the local and regional markets.

However, recent interviews conducted in northern Vietnam show that for many in the lowlands, the montagnards are persistently seen as primitive and superstitious and their "bad habits," such as customary religious beliefs and agricultural practices, are actively discouraged. This age-old prejudiced perception, which communist discourse had only put in a new suit, is not likely to disappear in the near future, if it ever does. It remains to be seen whether political and economic liberalization in Vietnam will have any significant impact in this process. Southeast Asian neighbors like Thailand and Indonesia are ahead on the same road, but results there are not entirely encouraging. As Salemink (1995: 93) sharply summarized, "The plight of Vietnam's Montagnards is by no means unique in Southeast Asia.

Many of the former 'tribes' which are now ethnic minorities in the territories of independent states have difficult relations with the states in which they live. This is mostly attributed to arrogance and ethnocentrism on the part of the majority (ethnic) groups in these states, to assimilationist policies, to the long-term effects of colonial divide-and-rule policies—or a combination of these."

Notes

The first version of this article was presented at the 1997 annual conference of the Association for South-East Asian Studies in the United Kingdom held at Hull under the title Montagnards and the Outside World in Northern Vietnam over the Last Two Hundred Years. I thank the audience there for their enlightening comments. I wish to thank the British Academy and the University of Hull Research Support Fund for their financial support during the research leading to this article. The constructive critiques by Terry Rambo, the anonymous referees of *Ethnohistory*, Sarah Turner, and Christian Culas were also invaluable. I drew the three maps in this article using a package of original computerized maps of Southeast Asia, conceived and produced at Université Laval (Québec, Canada) by Rodolphe De Koninck and his team of cartographers and postgraduate students (see De Koninck 1994).

1 Khong Dien 1995.
2 Unnecessarily restricted to the minority populations of the Central Highlands in most of American scholarship since the 1950s, the term *montagnard* here is given back its original French meaning, that of mountain people. In early French literature on Indochina (see, for instance, Colonel Diguet 1908), as well as in a growing number of recent English-language publications, the term is understood as encompassing the minority populations living in all of the Indochinese mountainous areas, the *montagnes* in French. Terms such as *highlanders* or *uplanders* are also acceptable; in this essay I give preference to *montagnards*.
3 To the possible exception of Gerald C. Hickey's (1958) very rarely cited dissertation.
4 For an account of the preserved pre–nineteenth-century Vietnamese archives, see Dang Phuong-Nghi 1969: 23–31. See also an early Chinese account in Ma Touan Lin 1883, a thirteenth-century text translated from Chinese and annotated by Marquis d'Hervey de Saint-Denys.
5 See the color sketches from the Garnier–Doudart de Lagrée expedition to Yunnan in 1873.
6 "L'origine du nom de Tonkin est *Dong-Kinh*, Cour royale de l'Orient. Lorsque les Européens abordèrent en Cochinchine pour la première fois vers la fin du XVe siècle, la capitale d'Annam devait porter indifféremment les noms de Kecho ou de Dong-kinh. Comme ils ne comprenaient qu'imparfaitement la langue annamite, ils employèrent le nom qui s'appliquait seulement au lieu de la résidence royale, pour désigner tout le pays compris entre la vice-royauté naissante de Cochinchine et la Chine" (Lesserteur 1896: 148).
7 Unlike the official listing in Vietnam today, but in accordance with the official Vietnamese linguistic classification of National Minorities, all of the groups be-

longing to the Tai language subfamily, when addressed collectively, are named Tai in this article.

8 Thô-ti is actually the name given to the descendants of such Kinh mandarins described earlier who were sent to live with the Tho and represent the imperial authority. Their mixed blood assured them of a higher status within the Tho society. See McAleavy 1968.

9 For a more complete ethnographic panorama of the northern highlands, see Lunet de Lajonquière 1904, 1906; Abadie 1924; Lebar et al. 1964; Kunstadter 1967: chaps. 1, 18–20; and Schrock 1972.

10 See Jenks 1994. On social unrest in the south before the nineteenth century, see Lombard-Salmon 1972.

11 Puginier gives a vivid account of such an attack on a newly converted Catholic hamlet in Tonkin, where more than two hundred Christians were killed. 8 Novembre 1884.

12 Raquez and Cam 1904: 256–75. The 1860s is also the time that Hmong elders in Vietnam today declare that their ancestors arrived to the Dong Van and Meo Vac districts on the Chinese border, allegedly the first Hmong settlements in Vietnam, according to Vietnamese ethnologists (Institute of Ethnology 1997). It is almost certain, though, that Hmong migrants arrived earlier than that and remained perhaps unnoticed for several years; for an overview of the literature on Hmong migrations from China into Indochina, see Culas and Michaud 1997.

13 See the vibrant account of the invasion and the in extremis escape by Pavie and the king in Pavie 1947: chaps. 3–5.

14 See, for instance, the archives at the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer in France under the Résidence Supérieure au Tonkin series, nos. 56453–80.

15 The extension of French involvement in the opium trade both in China and in French Indochina, and the particular importance of this rail link with Yunnan (where huge opium crops were collected), is clearly illustrated in many economic publications of the early twentieth century, such as Brenier and Lichtenfelder 1909: 763–76. See also Niollet 1999.

16 More precisely, this proportion was 25 percent of the gross general budget in average between 1899 and 1906, and 21 percent between 1907 and 1913. Then, because of World War I and its adverse effects on the transfer of capital from the metropole, it went up to 30 percent in 1914 to reach a maximum of 42 percent in 1918. Year in year out, opium provided 15–20 percent of the net revenues in French Indochina (Descours-Gatin 1992: 222–25). See also detailed figures in Le Failler 1993.

17 On the subject of the military territories, see Annuaire général 1903: 1039–80, where their origin and legal frame are explained.

18 See an interesting example of this in the Résidence Supérieure au Tonkin fund at the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, 5952, "Concession de terrains appartenant aux Meos à Chapa (1941)."

19 As an illustration, Abadie (1924: 167) describes (free?) exchanges of sexual services between some Meo and Lolo young girls and Europeans, including French troops and officers, just outside the post at Dong-Van in Ha Giang region (Third Military Territory).

20 See, for instance, correspondence on early (and rather short-lived) attempts through the *Mission des sauvages* in 1854 and 1881–83, narrated respectively in the Société des missions étrangères de Paris archives, vol. 709 (nos. 90, 99–100, 103, 112–14) and vol. 710 (nos. 2–4, 11, 21).

21 See several letters from Puginier to the French colonial authorities in vol. 816 of the archives of the Société des missions étrangères de Paris, in particular no. 58: "11 juin 1886, Mgr Puginier à M le Résident Général Paul Bert.—Nécessité d'entrer en relation avec les tribus demi-sauvages habitant les montagnes du Tonkin et de l'Annam."

22 To the exception of a few localized "Meo rebellions," about which some military reports exist, and a few ad hoc issues linked to the White Tai suzerainty over the Black River Valley.

23 In the years before the death of the White Tai leader in 1909, the issue of the hereditary transmission of power to his sons was raised. Pavie had included this right in the 1889 treaty but aging Deo and his sons had to argue before the clause was finally implemented. See the correspondence in the Résidence Supérieure au Tonkin fund at the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, 56476, 1903–11, "Succession politique de Deo Van Tri. Constitution de la province de Lai Chau."

24 On the *muang*-based political organization of the Tai, see Condominas 1976: 7–67; see also the short account by David K. Wyatt (1984: chap. 1).

25 On this exploitation phenomenon, missionary Paul Joseph Girod, who was attached to the Haut-Tonkin vicariate, had observed earlier that "Les Thaï . . . firent, des Man et des Méo, de véritables esclaves"; *Comptes-Rendus* (Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris 1900), 151.

26 Bernard Fall (1964: 275) states that by 1954, GCMA guerrillas in northeastern Laos and adjoining northwestern Vietnam numbered about five thousand; he does not mention how many were active elsewhere in northern Vietnam. Colonel Roger Trinquier (1976: 143) states that by the end of 1953, troops in the Groupement Mixte d'Intervention, the successor of the GCMA, had increased from five thousand to fourteen thousand, inclusive of various Tai montagnards.

27 See several detailed counterguerrilla operations presented from the perspective of their French commander in Trinquier 1976.

28 This observation was also made by John McAlister (1967). In his analysis of the causes for several Tai soldiers to desert at Dien Bien Phu only two days into the battle, it is interesting to note that Fall (1967: 163–65) overlooked the causes just examined and retained only the efficiency of Communist propaganda as a plausible explanation.

29 I conducted several interviews of Hmong and Yao elders during summer 1997 and 1999 in Sa Pa region (the Lao Cai province), an area where numerous pro-French montagnards fought against the Viet Minh. My questions about what happened locally after the Geneva Conference were often met with careful wording or even silence.

30 Note that De Hartingh 1996: 409 gives slightly different figures obtained from French and Vietnamese archives: "Le 7 mai 1955, pour le 1er anniversaire de Dien Bien Phu, fut créée la zone autonome thai meo. Celle-ci regroupait dix-sept districts (châu) sur lesquels vivaient 330.000 personnes de 21 ethnies différentes. Le 19 août 1956, date anniversaire des débuts de la Révolution à Ha noi, fut à son tour fondée la zone autonome du Viet Bac, comprenant les provinces de Cao bang, Lang son, Thai nguyen, Bac can et Tuyen quang, plus le district de Huu lung (province de Vac giang). Soit 800.000 personnes de 12 ethnies, surtout Tay et Nung. Enfin à la fin de l'année 1956 fut créé le district autonome de Tua chua pour 8000 Meo." See also Post 1989 2: 57–58.

31 Autonomous Regions in Vietnam officially ceased to exist on 29 December 1975. See Connor 1984: 119.
32 A more recent version of this translated quotation of official Vietnamese documents and the following ones in this article can be found in 1995.
33 In addition, in Communist Vietnam's highlands, according to Viet Chung (1996), malaria had primarily been wiped out by 1965, while illiteracy had disappeared in 1961.
34 "In this nomenclature ethnic groups are determined on the basis of three criteria: language, material life and culture, and ethnic consciousness. As at December 1978 they numbered 54" (Socialist Republic 1990: 57).

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