



THE THIRD FORCE IN THE VIETNAM WAR

The Elusive
Search
for Peace
1954-75

Sophie Quinn-Judge

I.B. TAURIS

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‘Sophie Quinn-Judge’s *The Third Force in the Vietnam War: The Elusive Search for Peace 1954–75* is the most careful, thorough and persuasive analysis of the often heartbreaking efforts of non-aligned Vietnamese to help bring about peace. The crushing of those efforts is a largely untold story – until now. Quinn-Judge’s brilliant book transforms our understanding of South Vietnamese politics and thus of the war itself.’

Marilyn B. Young, Professor of Modern History, NYU

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*I would like to dedicate this book to all of the people of Vietnam, in the hope that
they will enjoy peace for 10,000 years to come.*

Viet-Nam, Oh Viet-Nam!
Will you hear the last will
Of someone who loves Viet-Nam?
Who loves our revolutionary forefathers,
Our new, young revolutionaries,
Our orphans, our widows,
Who loves the mountains and rivers,
And every drop of blood,
Both of the meek and the fierce.

Viet-Nam, Oh Viet-Nam!
Why do we bear grudges forever?
How can we be happy with killing?
In victory, who are the vanquished?
Who bears both the honor and dishonor?
Throw away labels and slogans,
We are all children of Viet-Nam.

Nhất Chí Mai, May 1967
translated by David Marr

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FOR	Fellowship of Reconciliation
FRUS	<i>Foreign Relations of the United States</i>
ICC	International Control Commission
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party
IVS	International Voluntary Service
LSNBKC	<i>Lịch Sử Nam Bộ Kháng Chiến</i>
MAE	Ministère des Affaires étrangères
MRC	Military Revolutionary Council
NLF	National Liberation Front
NXB	Nhà Xuất Bản [publishing house]
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRO	Public Record Office
PTT	Phủ Tổng Thống
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VWP	Vietnam Workers' Party

INTRODUCTION

There was a real Third Force. It had everything – numbers, wisdom and courage – except a force.

Jean Lacouture¹

That the Vietnam War was a great tragedy, few people have any doubt. But that it was a completely avoidable tragedy is an idea that arouses more debate. Historian Fredrik Logevall has made a strong case that Lyndon Johnson embarked on a ‘war of choice’ in 1964–5, and other authors have written of the missed opportunities to make peace that punctuated the following years.² This book explores the terrain of Vietnamese politics and society in a search for *local* forces that supported these moves toward peace; forces that could have built consensus rather than enmity, reconciliation rather than fear, had they been allowed to flourish. It will tell the story of those Vietnamese who believed that war was not inevitable, who believed that once it had begun, it did not need to continue. It will look at the moments when they had most hope of implementing their vision. It will also detail their failures.

The related concepts of a ‘Third Way’ and ‘Third Force’, often used interchangeably, cover a great deal of territory and provoke strong reactions. I have opted to use ‘Third Way’ or ‘Third Solution’ as the terms to describe the middle ground during the Vietnam War, as they imply a peaceful approach to conflict resolution as opposed to an alternative military solution. In fact, within the context of the Vietnam Wars, the idea that an armed ‘Third Force’ might emerge disappeared fairly quickly.

In general the term 'Third Force' is fraught with extreme, often negative, connotations. This is especially true in the case of Vietnam. Graham Greene's telling of an early American adventure in nation-building, the effort to build up a splinter group of the army of a southern religious sect, the Cao Đài, into an anti-French, anti-communist force, leaves a strong impression of idealism run amok. The protagonist of *The Quiet American*, Alden Pyle, seems to be a composite of several US government employees who displayed a Yankee missionary zeal in their efforts to strengthen non-communist nationalism in Vietnam. Among those suggested as models for Greene's character are Robert Blum, who went to Vietnam in 1950 to head the US Economic Cooperation Mission; his deputy Leo Hochstetter (both mentioned in Robert Shaplen's *The Lost Revolution*) and Edward Lansdale, San Francisco advertising man turned OSS operative, and later a colonel in the US Air Force.³ Blum and Hochstetter had the difficult challenge of promoting 'authentic nationalism', at the same time as the USA furnished military aid to the French army.⁴ Edward Lansdale is far better known than the other two as the key factor in the successful elimination of communist insurgency in the Philippines in the days of Ramon Magsaysay; and later as the man who engineered Ngô Đình Diệm's victory over his rivals in the early days of his leadership.

The Republic of Vietnam (RVN) was created in 1955, with a good deal of help from Lansdale and other 'Quiet Americans', as a Third Force of the type Greene so disparaged. It was designed to wage the battle against communism more effectively than the colonial French or the monarch Bảo Đại, with the patriotic anti-communist Diệm at its helm. But it soon evolved into one of the two main combatants or forces. With US support, the Diệm government became a very much aligned outpost of what used to be called the Free World, in a South East Asia beset by ethnic and left-wing unrest. But this initial American attempt to build up the nationalist middle ground was only the first in a long series of attempts to find a 'Third Way' or a neutral solution for the section of Vietnam below the 17th parallel. From 1956 to 1973, this idea evolved into the concept of a 'Third Segment', as it was termed in the Paris Peace Agreement. By then the idea that the buffer group mediating between the two warring sides would be an armed force had long since been abandoned.

Why Study the Third Way?

What sort of choices were the people of South Vietnam offered during the Vietnam War? This is the question that forms the basis for this inquiry. Both sides in the conflict like to claim that 'there was no other road to take', that war was the only choice. Yet, given the number of efforts to negotiate peace, one can see that plenty of people thought that other options existed. In order to explore this issue thoroughly, one needs to examine the evolution of the interconnected concepts of a 'Third Force'/'Third Segment' and a 'neutral solution' to the US–Vietnam conflict. There are now relatively few observers (historians, journalists, Vietnamese at home or living abroad) who believe that the victory of the communist forces in 1975 was the inevitable, culturally appropriate solution for a poor peasant state. (That was an underlying assumption of some of the histories of Vietnamese communism written in the 1970s.) With the vastly increased understanding of Asian communism that has developed in the 1980s and 1990s, historians of the Vietnam conflict are now examining counterfactuals and looking at some of the other actors – the losers, as well as the winners – the nationalist parties, the dissident writers and those who came out on the wrong side in communist party power struggles. There is also a growing movement to 'decentre' the way we look at the American war in Vietnam. Scholars are looking beyond the power centres of the Cold War – Washington, Moscow and Beijing – back to the heart of the conflict: Vietnam. Much of post-Cold War historical writing about the Vietnam conflict has actually been about the role and attitudes of the superpowers and China.⁵ Sometimes one got the impression that the Vietnamese were regarded as bit players in the drama of the Indochina Wars. (We all know that the Cambodians were part of the 'sideshow'.)

I believe that we need to look at the Vietnamese and their politics as something more complex than the story of communists versus nationalists; or American puppets versus pawns of the communist bloc. One old Vietnam hand, the BBC's Judy Stowe, used to say that the Cold War history of Vietnam tends to treat the Vietnamese as 'gooks' – by this she meant, I believe, that we are prone to view the Vietnamese, North or South, as undifferentiated blocs of loyal followers, a people whose often arcane internal politics can be of no interest to the larger world. Yet it is impossible to analyse the fate of

the various peace missions and 'missed opportunities' in Vietnam without understanding something more of Vietnamese politics, communist and non-communist, than many writers on this period have demonstrated. When one starts looking, it turns out that there are a surprising number of signs that many Vietnamese wanted to talk to their enemy rather than fight him.

Although in recent years there has been considerable discussion of 'missed opportunities' to find peace during the Vietnam War (among them are the book by Robert McNamara and his co-authors, *Argument without End*, and the edited volume, *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964–1968* by Lloyd C. Gardiner and Ted Gittinger, as well as *Marigold*, by James Hershberg), there has been relatively little attention paid to the issue of how the Vietnamese themselves would have managed a peaceful resolution.⁶ Vietnamese actors began to put forward proposals for a neutral South Vietnam as early as 1955, but at that time their ideas were largely ignored by the international community. From 1962, however, when agreement was reached on a neutral government for Laos, until the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement on Vietnam in 1973, there was a fairly constant stream of suggestions from different quarters regarding a neutral or compromise solution to end hostilities in South Vietnam. Former State Department official Chester Cooper has said that within a short period in 1966 he handled offers of mediation from 'Mrs. Gandhi, Tito, Nasser, Wilson, U Thant, Eden and a host of others'.⁷ These proposals would eventually have relied on neutral or Third Segment Vietnamese for their implementation. Most of these plans involved bringing respected, non-aligned personalities into a coalition government. By 1965 these potential compromise leaders were often Buddhists, as opposed to members of the Catholic minority to which President Diệm belonged. By the time of the Paris Peace Agreement in 1973, at least theoretically the concept of a 'Third Segment' as a buffer between the two opposing parties had become an important element in the architecture of peace.

To honestly examine the chances for success of such proposals, one has to accept the premise that the communist side was an evolving entity, whose capabilities and goals changed over the years. Hanoi's attitude towards a negotiated peace fluctuated over the course of the war, depending on the views of their allies and their own evaluation of their chances for rapid success. Thus one can posit that a war-weary DRV

would not have intervened militarily in the South, if the communists there had been allowed access to a democratic political process after 1954. The same might be said of 1973 – had the political provisions of the Paris ‘Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam’ been implemented, the DRV might well have opted to put more resources into its crippled economy and reduce its military role in the South. Likewise, we need to recognize that it was the American military intervention that pulled the Soviets into the War, leading eventually to the creation of large and well-equipped armed forces in the DRV.⁸ (The communists did not have tanks or jet fighters when the war began.) Chinese scholars also point out that the aggressive US presence in South Vietnam strengthened Mao Zedong’s hand in his struggle with more moderate forces in China, which in turn reinforced the position of radicals in the Vietnamese party.⁹ US escalation was always met by escalation on the communist side, both militarily and ideologically. As the southern politician Trần Ngọc Châu put it, in explaining the hard-line attitudes towards those (like himself) searching for a middle path in Vietnamese politics, ‘My effort would be opposed by both the North Vietnamese Communists and American-supported South Vietnamese military dictatorship, because those two opposing sides actually nurtured each other, despite being bitter enemies.’¹⁰

Rather than engaging in a counterfactual exercise, however, I would like to record as objectively as possible the dilemmas of the leaders in the middle ground. One of the basic tasks of this exercise is to distinguish the different ideas of a Third Force or Third Segment that existed in the minds of the French, the Americans and among the southern Vietnamese intelligentsia. For the purposes of this study, I am eliminating speculation about armed third forces. I am interested in non-violent political and social forces that attempted to play the role of intermediaries. There are several factors that complicate the definition of who was and who was not a member of a ‘Third Segment’. One of these, perhaps the most important, is the long-standing communist practice of ‘entryism’, otherwise known as ‘infiltration’, into non-communist political and social groups. Hồ Chí Minh cut his political teeth when this was the preferred tactic of colonial communist groups, during the united front in southern China from 1923 to 1927. It was still a favoured method of political organizing in South Vietnam in the 1970s, when any group, from the Girl Scouts to an amateur dance troupe, could be

secretly influenced by young communist activists. At the same time, many non-communist Vietnamese were pushed into the arms of the communists and the National Liberation Front (NLF) by the polarization of southern politics in the 1960s. Thus you could find founding members of the NLF and communist-backed Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), such as the Justice Minister Trương Như Tảng, who were non-communists, while a number of non-communist southerners had opened a dialogue with the NLF by 1970. But some of the presumed Third Segment student leaders such as Huỳnh Tấn Mẫm were actually full members of the Vietnam Workers' Party (Đảng Lao Động) by 1973. Mẫm himself, who played the role of a Third Segment student leader until 1975, joined the party in 1967. On the other hand, early proponents of neutralism such as Nguyễn Mạnh Hà, accused of pro-communism by the Diệm government, simply believed that peace would bring about a convergence between the two parts of Vietnam, beyond partisan politics.

It may in the end be more fruitful to look at Vietnamese politics as a continuum, with figures on both the left and right of the spectrum at times edging closer to the middle ground. One of the questions that this study will raise is whether some followers of the communists were actually closer in their ideological outlook to the Third Segment than to the Stalinist Maoism of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus I will cover the evolution of political attitudes and factions within the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) as part of this study, and try to show how changing constellations of power impinged on the search for peace.

There is now little doubt in my mind that the nationwide communist infrastructure in Vietnam was often the source of peace initiatives that took shape in the RVN among opposition groups. But such initiatives depended on genuine members of a Third Segment to make them known to world opinion, as well as to the citizens of the Republic. These personalities were not pressured or blackmailed into playing this role – in most cases they genuinely believed that the continuation of the US-supported war would destroy their homeland. These intermittent peace campaigns were often crushed by the weight of official US opposition, but also at times by the disapproval of radical political forces in the DRV, backed by China, who saw a total military victory as the only way to make a revolution.

CHAPTER 1

THE VIETNAMESE RESPONSE TO COLONIALISM: EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY TRANSFORMATIONS

The Vietnamese are people of feeling, who possess a strong national pride, who are broad-minded, yet who still have a lot of complexes about white people, as a result of almost a century of French domination.

Tin Sáng – 25 February 1964

Before 1965, the people of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) were not clamouring for US military intervention in their civil war. The US leadership had to search hard for South Vietnamese leaders willing to wage the sort of war against the insurgents that they believed to be necessary, as the following chapters will show. Once the US troops had entered the conflict, however, making peace became a very complex proposition. But both before and after 1965 there were moments when the United States might have pulled back from its commitment to a military solution. If we could have foreseen the huge price that our Vietnamese allies would pay, not to mention the sacrifices of so many young Americans, the chances are that we would have examined options for peace more carefully. And had we stopped to consider the complicated attitudes of our allies, before pressuring the South Vietnamese government to accept the arrival of

US combat troops on their soil in 1965, we might have proceeded differently.

An August 1964 editorial from a weekly newspaper published by young Buddhist intellectuals in Huế gives some idea of how we misjudged the situation. The article compares the role of Chinese advisers in North Vietnam and the growing number of American advisers in South Vietnam. 'We've just heard about another government decree, announcing that in addition to military advisers (now here in formations up to battalion strength) there will be more advisers: for culture, agriculture, industry, and especially for political administration ... This is an unusual problem', the writer says. This 'is no different from Communist China establishing a regime of advisers in North Vietnam'.¹ These young men were not voicing an extreme view within the political spectrum – both President Ngô Đình Diệm and his immediate successor, General Dương Văn Minh, were leery of an excessive American presence in South Vietnam.

This deep-rooted nationalism of the Vietnamese, both educated classes and the peasantry, was not sufficiently understood by Americans, who in their own narrative represented the friends of the oppressed and the antithesis of European colonialism. US government policymakers rejected any comparisons between the French and the US roles in Indochina. McGeorge Bundy, for example, wrote in June 1965 that 'France in 1945 was a colonial power seeking to impose its overseas rule out of tune with Vietnamese nationalism ... The US in 1965 is responding to the call of a people under Communist assault, a people undergoing a non-Communist revolution.'² A close examination of South Vietnamese politics in 1963–5 leads to the conclusion that this 'call' was largely imagined by US strategists, who had unilaterally chosen Vietnam as the place to hold the line against what they assumed was monolithic world communism. As Frances Fitzgerald put it, Vietnam 'was still a very distant and foreign place, whose major interest to Americans lay in its location to the south of China'.³ The tendency of foreigners to see the Vietnamese as culturally backwards and childlike was a product of ignorance and self-delusion, but it made the American narrative more compelling. After a stint with the US marines as a young intelligence officer in the early 1960s, historian David Marr observed that the military leaders running the US counter-insurgency effort were 'fundamentally bored by the political complexities of Vietnam'.⁴ They

appeared to be content to accept clichéd assumptions about the Vietnamese, as people who ‘found little meaning or value in political ideology, except perhaps some archaic Confucian maxims’, ‘with neither the desire nor capability for profound national identifications’.⁵

Yet Vietnamese culture had been in a rapid process of transformation from the early days of French rule. Had US policymakers been better informed on a few basic issues – the precolonial history of Vietnam, the responses of the Vietnamese to French rule, the history of the Vietnamese communist movement, as well as the sources of Vietnamese national feeling – they might have had more respect for Vietnamese public opinion. Traditional Vietnamese religious beliefs and the transformations that Vietnamese ideologies underwent in the twentieth century should have been part of the curriculum for would-be interventionists. But most of the information that existed on this distant country was in French or Vietnamese. By the late 1960s the United States would be on the way to developing a corps of outstanding scholars in Vietnamese studies (including David Marr), who produced some classic books on Vietnamese intellectual and political history.⁶ But their books mainly appeared just as the war was ending. Journalists also wrote excellent books on Vietnam, but given the siege mentality that developed within the Johnson and Nixon administrations, the more critical efforts (from David Halberstam to Frances Fitzgerald and Jonathan Schell) were looked on as the work of a whining elite, or worse, unpatriotic betrayals.⁷

The main thing that we needed to know might be summed up this way: the Vietnamese were not passive victims of a few aggressive communists trained in Moscow and Beijing – on the contrary, they were a sophisticated people who had lived in the global imperial world for over 80 years by the time we became involved in their defence. Since the end of the nineteenth century they had been examining their position as a French possession and debating when and how to rid themselves of their colonial masters. They had been seeking answers around the world, in both the East and the West. They had arrived at a variety of opinions on these questions, and these were debated at many different levels of society.

Moreover, Vietnamese nationalists knew quite a bit about the United States: they had experienced two previous disappointments with our nation, at moments when they had had high hopes that the USA would

intervene with the French on their behalf. These moments came at the close of the two World Wars, during which two different US presidents, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, had given explicit promises to colonized peoples that they would receive the freedom to determine their own fates, once the USA and their allies triumphed. But both times in the past, in 1919 and 1945, Vietnam's case for self-determination had been ignored when the moment of truth came. The disappointment in 1919 had pushed many Vietnamese anti-colonialists to look to the communist world for support. In 1945 the coalition government under Hồ Chí Minh never succeeded in winning the support of the United States, although they had hoped that a brief alliance with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), precursor of the CIA, would lead to American backing for their independence.⁸

Given the amount of thought and energy the Vietnamese had devoted to the issue of their future, it is clear that in 1954 and 1965 we should have paid more attention to their political complexities, as opposed to the categories that we imposed on them. (As the editorial noted above indicates, in South Vietnam the intelligentsia made their opinions clear in their lively and contentious press.) Had we looked a little bit more deeply, we might have had more faith in the Vietnamese capacity to settle their affairs.

The French Colonial Transformations

In the following pages I will review briefly some of the transformations that occurred in Vietnam, after it fell under French domination in the 1880s, at the close of a 20-year period of piecemeal conquest.

Change came from every direction in those years around the turn of the twentieth century, much of it unsought and unwanted. The early revolts against French power, led by members of both the scholarly class and the ranks of charismatic religious figures, made this rejection clear. Logically, one might expect that direct French transmission of Western ways and thinking would have been the immediate cause of Vietnam's cultural transformation; indeed, the elite resistance to French power is sometimes portrayed as a resistance to modernization, as a struggle between conservative nativists and the forces of change.

But the process of change was not so straightforward. It was complicated by French ambivalence towards the people of their colony

and protectorates. The French drew back from initial thoughts of assimilating the Vietnamese population, of turning them into French men and women. For a start, a large outlay of funds would have been needed to build the sort of educational system that assimilation would have required. At the same time, the French quickly discovered that the Vietnamese who became familiar with their society expected French political ideals to be applied in the colony, something they were not prepared to allow. So the colonial civil servants who constructed the infrastructure of government opted for 'association' as the model of their relationship with their subjects. This promised less, as it did not require that the French provide universal education in the French language. It also quelled 'premature' ideas about Vietnamese self-government. The system of association was justified by the idea that the Vietnamese needed to go through a period of tutelage before they would be ready to fully partake of French civilization. It meant that separate legal systems and restricted educational opportunities for the native Vietnamese remained in place until 1945.

Vietnam's traditional link with Chinese culture was broken by the introduction of primary education in the Vietnamese language, transcribed in the romanized script invented by early missionaries: *quốc ngữ*. Yet secondary and higher education in French were available only to the select few. The sort of education offered to the Vietnamese elite was designed to make them useful to the French as interpreters, clerks and managers. The views of a French doctor on the training of medical personnel gives an idea of this approach: writing in 1895 on the 'Diffusion of European medicine in Cochinchina', he advised against sending students to Europe to complete medical training, as the Dutch were doing in Indonesia. A three-year course in Saigon, followed by practical training in a French hospital in Indochina would be sufficient for them to earn a 'certificate'. A long stay in Paris would cost the French too much, he reasoned, and besides, 'the holders of [French] diplomas would return with immense pride and impossible pretensions', he wrote.⁹

But by 1904 the Vietnamese were no longer just passive recipients of what passed for the French gift of civilization. They were discovering their own sources of information and making demands for reforms based on their independent search for knowledge. Before the advent of French power the Nguyễn rulers placed their faith in adherence to the

Confucian ideals of government that they had absorbed from China. And it would be via their links to the Chinese cultural world that inquiring scholars would first come into contact with Western philosophical ideas, after the turn of the century.¹⁰ The Vietnamese intelligentsia was forced initially to go around French channels of information in their attempts to make an independent judgment on the usefulness of Western culture for their development. This was made possible by the burgeoning civil society in Japan during the cultural revolution of the Meiji era.

The energizing of civil society in East Asian states can be directly linked to the challenge from the West. Throughout the nineteenth century the threat of Western domination, both political and economic, grew into an inescapable reality. The nations in this region, China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, were all bureaucratic states modelled on the Chinese ideal of government by a just ruler. But by the end of the century the educated elite in each country could see that their model would require adjustments. The Japanese reacted most speedily to the demonstration of their military inferiority to the West, sending missions to Europe and the United States after Commander Perry forced the opening of their commerce to American merchants. During the Meiji Restoration the search for Western knowledge expanded into two-year study tours to examine the industrial, scientific and social achievements of Europe and North America. While the Japanese built new government institutions and created a new constitution, they also adopted new models of education, including universities providing liberal arts and science curricula.

In its turn, by 1898 Japan would become a place of pilgrimage for other Asians seeking knowledge and the means to free themselves from Western control, or in the case of China, their own decaying empire. A 1906 visit to a Japanese school modelled on Harvard, the Keio Gijuku, inspired the Vietnamese reformer, Phan Châu Trinh, to create similar schools in Vietnam. For Phan Châu Trinh and other Vietnamese educated in the classical Chinese style, the main conduit for information about Western political theory was the writing of a Chinese reformer based in Japan, Liang Qichao (Luong Khai Sieu). Even before Trinh and his fellow scholar Phan Bội Châu had made their trip to Yokohama and Tokyo, Liang's writings had begun to stimulate discussion among Vietnam's scholarly elite. Some of them decided to join him in Japan. Phan Bội Châu formed a secret society in 1904 to raise money to send

students to Japan for study and military training. In 1905 a trickle of students started to join him in Yokohama, the start of what became known as the 'Đông du' or Eastern Travel movement. By 1908 there were roughly 300 Vietnamese students in Japan.

Phan Châu Trinh, his fellow reformer, had become disillusioned with armed revolt. He had been a young witness to the failed military uprising that broke out in Central Vietnam in 1885, when the Nguyễn emperor Hàm Nghi was persuaded to flee to the mountains by a group of court mandarins. Trinh's father was a military commander in their native province of Quảng Nam and had taken his son with him to the hills, to help defend a local fort. After his father's death and the revolt's collapse, Trinh came down from the mountains in 1887, to find that his family home and possessions had been burned to the ground by the French army. An older brother supported his studies for the mandarin, and in 1901 he passed his exams at the metropolitan level, as a second-rank doctor (*phó-bảng*) – in the same year and with the same results that Hồ Chí Minh's father achieved. This enabled him to take up a prestigious, but by then largely ceremonial, post in the Huế bureaucracy, which the French had emasculated by taking over many of the emperor's powers.

In 1904 Trinh was starting his second year in the Ministry of Rites, a typical entry post in the bureaucracy for new examination laureates, when he withdrew from the mandarin. This is when he made what David Marr calls 'a declaration of lifelong warfare' with the Nguyễn dynastic system.¹¹ His basic complaint was that the French partnership with the mandarin tolerated corruption and abuse of power. He began to advocate the wearing of Western dress and hair-cutting. In addition to practical education in science and agriculture, he advocated the development of Vietnamese manufacturing and locally owned businesses. One of his early hopes was that the French could be persuaded to aid the Vietnamese in bringing a more open and just government to their nation, based on the ideals of the French Revolution. Marr and other biographers have surmised that Trinh was influenced by Liang Qichao's writings, in particular his newspaper, *Xinmin Congbao* (*Renewing the People*), published from 1902–5 in Yokohama. A memoir by Trinh's contemporary, Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, confirms that by 1904 this periodical was being read by scholars in Huế.¹² It was an outgrowth of Liang's rejection of Confucian tradition and morality as a compass for reform; its articles reflected his eclectic

reading and passion for free thought.¹³ On first encountering these ideas coming from Japan, 'Phan Châu Trinh got so excited about the new books that he couldn't sleep, he forgot to eat – from this point, he had a complete change in his thinking.'¹⁴ As far as we know, all of Trinh's knowledge of Western political and philosophical ideas, from Rousseau to Herbert Spencer, came from reading translations or summaries in Chinese.

Trinh invited two more recent graduates, Huỳnh Thúc Kháng and Trần Quý Cáp, to join him in a southern tour in order to popularize their newfound opposition to the Chinese examination system. The three posed as candidates at the regional exams in Bình Định and composed satirical examination poetry that became well known to many scholars. When Trinh came down with a serious illness in Phan Thiết, his two companions returned to their homes and he remained behind for a four-month convalescence. He stayed in the home of a local scholar, Nguyễn Trọng Lợi, where he held discussions with a group of reform-minded local men. Nguyễn Trọng Lợi became the founder of the Dục Thanh School, and of the Liên Thành company, which produced fish sauce, a staple of the Vietnamese diet. Dục Thanh started as a youth association for physical training before it became a fully fledged modernist school.¹⁵

With the encouragement of the French Governor General, by late 1905 and early 1906 modernist schools were being formed in Quảng Nam province, two of them organized by Phan Châu Trinh's relatives. A cousin on his mother's side, Lê Cơ, was instrumental in starting a school in Phú Lâm, a village in Tiên Phước district, where pupils could learn *quốc ngữ* and French. It was the first modern school in Quảng Nam to admit girls; Trinh's daughter Lê Ám was among them. Lê Cơ, an activist village head, also started a cinnamon cooperative, to plant the trees and market the spice, and introduced other innovations such as a village forge and a village watch to protect against thieves.¹⁶ His out-of-the-way village was often visited by Vietnamese interested in the reforms being undertaken in Quảng Nam. By the time the school was dismantled by the French in 1908, it had over 100 pupils. After the anti-tax disturbances of 1908, Lê Cơ would be arrested and imprisoned for three years. The school's female teacher Lê Thị Mười, another maternal cousin of Trinh's, was also arrested but released in the province capital.¹⁷

In Cochinchina a similar reform movement grew up around 1906, the Minh Tân or New Light society. Gilbert Chiêu (Trần Chánh Chiêu),