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Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam

Micheline Lessard



Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam

Examining the widespread phenomenon of human trafficking in Vietnam during the period of French colonial rule, this book focuses on the practice of kidnapping or stealing Vietnamese women and children for sale in Chinese markets from the 1870s through to the 1940s.

The book brings to light the fact that human trafficking between Vietnam and China existed prior to more contemporary instances of this trade. It provides information as to the perpetrators, the nature, and the scope of this illicit commerce and its impact on the lives of its victims, who were mainly domestic servants, concubines, or prostitutes. The book also examines the ways in which French colonial actors (missionaries, administrators, military officers, adventurers and observers, and consuls) reported, described, and reacted to it, and goes on to analyze the impact of human trafficking on the concept of French “prestige” and on the French colonial project in Vietnam.

Human trafficking in Colonial Vietnam illustrates the tensions and the conflicts not only between the French and the Vietnamese, but also between the Vietnamese and the Chinese, as well as between the *colons* and the French colonial administration, and between the colonial and metropolitan governments. The book will be of interest to students and scholars of Southeast Asian History, Colonial History, and Criminology.

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Introduction

This manuscript brings to light what sources reveal to be the widespread practice of human trafficking in Việt Nam during the period of French colonial rule. The examination of a broad range of archival, printed, and published documents demonstrates that Vietnamese women and children were often kidnapped, stolen, or tricked into a life of servitude as they were forcibly removed from their families, homes, and villages, and subsequently taken to China where they were sold in markets located in cities such as Guangzhou, Longzhou, Beihai, Hong Kong, and Macau. Some were transported by land or by river routes from northern Việt Nam to the bordering Chinese provinces of Guangxi and Guangdong. Those who were smuggled by sea to Chinese ports were usually secreted out of Vietnamese cities such as Hải Phòng, Hồng Gai, and Nam Định. There were also instances of trafficking from and into Sài Gòn. In most instances, these women and children were destined to labour as domestic servants, to become concubines of Chinese men, or to work as prostitutes in Chinese brothels. Thorough archival research allows us to conclude that the trade in humans did exist, particularly in the borderlands between China and Việt Nam, prior to the establishment of French Indochina in 1885, but that it also continued after that date and well into the 1930s. In fact, sources reveal that this trade was not only extensive, but that French colonial policies and military campaigns often exacerbated the conditions which allowed it to flourish while French colonial authorities appeared unable to curtail it. Furthermore, France's inability to put an end to trafficking and to ensure the safety of those it referred to as its *protégés* seriously undermined its authority and its perceived notion of prestige in Indochina.

Any study of the trade in humans must necessarily also address questions of terminology and definition. First, a number of terms have been used to describe the activities analyzed in this manuscript. The most often cited are human trafficking, human smuggling, and forced migration. This study opts for the first since human trafficking also encompasses the latter two. The question of definition is more complex for the practices which may constitute human trafficking vary widely. They include a range of phenomena such as, among others, bride purchases, the sale of women and children to pay debts, the kidnapping of women and children for the purpose of sexual exploitation, the use of unfree labour, the sale and purchase of human organs. While this manuscript focuses almost exclusively on

historical instances of kidnappings and of forced (through violence, coercion, or trickery) migration, the definition developed and currently in use by the United Nations nonetheless applies:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of social exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.¹

In general terms, the range of human trafficking is broad. It covers vast geographical and temporal space. It encompasses also complex phenomena: criminal activity, sexual exploitation, the commodification of human beings and of human labour. While there may be similarities in time and space, all of these factors exist within the particularities of specific geographical, political, cultural, national, economic, and social contexts. There can therefore be no meta-history or meta-analysis of human trafficking. In her famous study on female sexual slavery, Kathleen Barry rightly posits that an economic approach, alone, for example, does not suffice for it can undermine “the feminist critique of sexual domination that has gone on since the beginning of the women’s movement.”² The commodification of women and children, the “trade” in humans, was, and remains, an economic enterprise, but this exploitation of women and children exists also within gendered and class frameworks and where such exploitation is embedded in social and cultural practices and is also to a great extent normalized. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated in the pages to follow, the colonial representations of this trade as well as the means used to rescue its victims were also couched in cultural and gendered terms. Finally, the colonial context itself engendered conditions which made possible the continued existence and the persistence of a trade in humans.

Therefore, what emerges clearly from the research conducted for this manuscript is that human trafficking between Việt Nam and China during the period of French colonial rule did not take place in a political, cultural, or gender-related vacuum. Instead, as scholar Lynellyn D. Long observed in her study of current states of human trafficking, it is a practice which situates itself within “specific cultural practices embedded in family and kinship relations” which “encourage and rationalize sexual trafficking of girls and young women in times of stress and dislocation.”³ It is difficult to trace the origins of the trade in Vietnamese women and children, but the earliest sources available reveal that it was occurring at a time of political and economic upheaval in both China and Việt Nam. This was particularly true in Tonkin, the northernmost area of what was to become French Indochina and which shared a border with China. The kidnappers roaming the border areas between China and Việt Nam in search of women and children to

be sold or bartered were responding to what might be termed “market demands.” However, the existence of women and children as a “product” of trade, be it legal or illicit, reveals much about the perceptions of childhood and about the status of women which prevailed during the period in question. The nature of this trade, as well as the social and cultural context which allowed it to thrive reveal a clear, undeniable proprietary attitude toward women and children. Vietnamese women and girls became both prized and preyed upon in the process. In addition, the trafficking of Vietnamese women and children during the French colonial period took place in a time of military conflict, economic transformation, and at the crossroads of cultural practices. In another study, scholar Sallie Yea mentions that “poverty, family obligations, and personal opportunism are among a range of factors that contribute to the creation of sites of vulnerability.”⁴ As anthropologist Lynellyn Long has noted, “In addition to specific cultural practices, periods of famine, depression, and social economic transition place girls and women at risk of being trafficked.”⁵ The instances of human trafficking depicted in this study indeed illustrate that with respect to the border areas between China and Việt Nam this trade’s victims were, almost exclusively, from the most vulnerable elements of Vietnamese society. Most kidnapping victims were taken either during raids on their villages or as they worked on their small plots of land, on their fishing boats, or as they walked on the roads and trails that led to the market towns. The motives for their capture were varied as well. Dire economic straits prompted many women to follow those who promised them work, even when it meant straying from their homes and villages. Others were tricked when they agreed to travel into China in the hopes of getting better process for their produce, their livestock, or their handicraft products. This was made possible due to long-term social practices pertaining to the role played by women in the Vietnamese economy. As George Curzon observed in 1893, Vietnamese women, especially peasant women, were not confined to the inner quarters of the home. Women conducted most of the family business:

Marketing is entirely conducted by the female sex, who may be seen for miles walking in single file along the narrow dikes that separate the soaking rice plots, and carrying their produce in baskets at the end of a bamboo pole. Others will approach in sampans along the water ways and canals.⁶

The relegation of these economic tasks to women often rendered them, especially in a time of war and turmoil, easy targets and virtually defenseless. In urban centres such as Hà Nội and Hải Phòng, the victims of trafficking include the children of fairly well-to-do Vietnamese. As historian Julia Martinez has noted, in 1908, for example, “new victims included the nine-year-old daughter of a Vietnamese guard, the six-year-old son of the secretary of public works, and the five-year-old son of a merchant.”⁷

When it comes to those who engaged in trafficking, definitions do not come easily. French colonial sources refer to those who engaged in human trafficking with terms like bandits, brigands, and pirates. With respect to piracy, scholar

J. L. Anderson has noted that “a broad definition that emerges from historical writing is that of the essentially indiscriminate taking of property (or persons) with violence, or by descent from the sea.”⁸ The colonial and quasi-colonial contexts, with their wars, rebellions, and inadequate means of protection, left Vietnamese peasants particularly defenseless. As will be illustrated in the pages that follow, there were different groups involved in the same illicit actions, and while their crimes were similar, their motives differed. Whether they were referred to as “pirates,” “rebels,” “bandits,” or “brigands,” they did not always operate within the same circles and out of the same principles or aims. Without engaging in a singularly Marxist interpretation of banditry, we can nonetheless find useful insight in the work of Eric Hobsbawm. In his book *Bandits*, Hobsbawm states that banditry “simultaneously challenges the economic, social, and political order by challenging those who hold or lay claim to power, law, and the control of resources.”⁹ In his study of the Black Flags, Eric Frécon refers to the description of piracy as a form of parallel state. While these groups were often anti-French as well as anti-Qing or anti-Nguyễn, many of them did not attempt to create a state, but many did engage in typical state-like activities. They formed armies. They funded their activities through theft and trade to be sure, but also through “tribute” – a system akin to taxation. In addition, the most organized groups, such as the Black Flags, for example, also “policed” the areas in which they operated or which were under their control. It is useful at this stage to refer to James Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed* to describe the relationship to power of these groups. In many instances, they developed to counter the threat of encroachment and greater centralization of state power that accompanied foreign domination in China and colonization in Việt Nam. What appears clearer, however, is what may be termed the development of parallel economies. While smuggling opium and other goods existed prior to the presence of colonial or quasi-colonial control, the French monopolies on goods such as opium created the impetus for black market economic activities. There is also a clear link between taxation, monopolies, and opium smuggling and human trafficking.

Instances of human trafficking were reported regularly beginning in the 1870s by missionaries posted in southern China and in Tonkin. They occur in the wake of wars between China and Britain, China and France, and France and Việt Nam. The volume of reports increased in the 1880s and 1890s during the French “Pacification” campaigns in Tonkin. These new accounts were written mostly by French military officers and by adventurers and physicians who accompanied French troops. While many of these accounts were subsequently published and disseminated widely in France, colonial newspapers also often provided news from the military campaigns, including instances of trafficking. By the 1890s, the trade in Vietnamese women and children had become a regular subject also in French consular and administrative reports and correspondence. As elaborated in the chapters to follow, the problematic nature of these sources also warrants analysis. All carry their own biases, their own interpretive prisms, their own shortcomings. Fortunately, the documents analyzed in this study come from a significant diversity of sources, and pieced together, they often corroborate one

another and allow the nature and the scope of his trade in humans to emerge and crystallize.

With the sources available to date, however, a number of questions remain unanswered. It is impossible to determine, for example, whether human trafficking between China and Việt Nam increased dramatically during France's military campaigns or whether the presence of the military in pursuit of rebel and armed bands simply allowed that which already existed on a large scale to emerge. In fact, attempts to quantify this trade, with the documents so far available to us, are futile. Although human trafficking was illegal until the twentieth century, the sales of women and children were allowed in China. It was, as it remains today, a clandestine and illicit business enterprise. As such, it defies quantification. While the sources used here indicate that this practice was widespread, it is impossible to provide statistical data. The documents available reveal only those cases of trafficking which came to the attention while the "successful" trade of women and children remains invisible.

A second, important, caveat is that the sources provide little direct testimony of the victims of this trade. The information provided by the women and children who were freed from their captors or who managed to escape their kidnapers' clutches, and that of those purchased or re-purchased by missionaries, is conveyed almost exclusively second-hand. This information is therefore filtered through the lens of missionaries, officers, observers, consuls, administrators, and journalists. It is safe to assume that there are few written, first-hand accounts since by and large the victims of this trade had little, if any, schooling, or could not read or write. In addition, the questions posed to these victims by those who rescued them focused primarily on traffickers themselves: their numbers, their locations and movements, the nature and the extent of their weaponry.

This manuscript avoids the question of "consent" which often arises in studies of human trafficking and of sex work. There are two principal reasons for this. First, this study focuses on forced migration. While in some cases women and children willingly followed those who would ultimately deliver them to traffickers, their motives were to seek work or to obtain better prices for their products and produce in Chinese markets. They did not consent to becoming concubines, servants, or prostitutes. As Seol Dong-Hoo has stated,

[p]erpetrators unilaterally conclude a deal without the victim's consent. Consent of victims under the control of perpetrators and their systematic restraint, be it through coercion, such as threat, kidnapping, violence, oppression, false promises for escape from poverty or money, pressing for repayment of debt or other non-economic benefits, cannot be considered voluntary.¹⁰

Second, it is true that once taken, some Vietnamese women who had become the wives or the concubines of the Chinese men who had purchased them chose to stay with them. Their reasons for staying, however, should not be construed as a form of consent. More likely, these women adapted to their difficult situations. Their agency lay in forging for themselves a new space, a new reality.