

# WHY 'INDOCHINA' IS A DIRTY WORD

By Jim Placzek  
Langara College, Vancouver

## Introduction

In this paper I argue that the term 'Indochina' is a term that is used without due care for the implications of its use. To begin with, the term itself is ambiguous, having at least three distinct meanings, only one of which is 'Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia'. This latter meaning, in turn, is shown to be inappropriate for a host of reasons. Historical sources are then reviewed to assess the possibility of Vietnamese notions of hegemony in the area.

As a simple point of reference, I will use the term 'Southeast Asia' to refer to the ten modern-day states of Burma, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines. Although there certainly has been academic debate about 'Southeast Asia' as a construct of Western scholarship or wartime convenience (e.g. Emmerson, Malleret), the best argument for Southeast Asia as a concrete political entity is the fact that the current ASEAN members have declared themselves dedicated to the ultimate formation of an 'ASEAN ten'. It will be interesting to see whether, after the ten are finally all included in the organization,

there will be strong opposition to the further expansion of the regional organization to include Papua New Guinea and Australia. Recent suggestions on including Australia have elicited resounding reservations.

## The term 'South East Asia'

The Term seems to have been coined by the French geographer Malte-Brun and regularized by Louis Malleret (Emmerson p.2). While the term 'Southeast Asia' is usually attributed to the organization of a South East Asian Command in World War II, that command originally excluded the Philippines and most of Indonesia, though these were later added. French Indochina was part of the China Command, and not SE Asia at all (Emmerson 7-8).

## Meanings of the term 'Indochina'

### 1. All of Southeast Asia

From time to time, especially in older works, one can find examples of the term 'Indochina' used to refer, in a general way to all or most of the area currently known as Southeast Asia (e.g. Webster's Third p.1153). This

comes from a general perception of the region as lying roughly between India and China, and that most of the cultures in the region have received a comprehensive and deep overlay of high culture from either India or China.

## 2. Mainland Southeast Asia

Especially in works on prehistory and art styles, and most prominently in works by French authors, we find the term 'Indochina' used to include not only Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, but also the remaining countries of the mainland, sometimes including the Malay peninsula. For example, Emmerson (18) finds a 1982 resuscitation of this concept opposed to a mainly maritime 'South East Asia'

## 3. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia

This is the most common meaning of 'Indochina' in current times. I contend that it is an entirely inappropriate term. In particular, 'Indochina' is a misleading, confusing, and totally inappropriate term because

- i. it has the above three overlapping meanings in the literature
- ii. it lumps together three entirely different and independent polities, cultures, and languages
- iii. the reasons for conjoining these three are, at best ignoble. These reasons are:
  - a. French colonial ambitions
  - b. US cold war misperceptions, miscalculations, and (ironically), wartime nostalgia
  - c. the implication or fear of Vietnamese aggressive and hegemonistic ambitions in Laos and Cambodia

If we examine the motives for continuing to use the term, we find that primarily, the term is used simply because it has become common in publications, international organizations, and programs in universities. However, if we examine further the original motives for use of the term, we find that except for the three clearly negative or doubtful motives listed above, there is no such entity as 'Indochina' referring to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Let us examine the three motives in more detail. We will see that some connections between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are due to basic geographical proximity, and that history shows an undeniable Vietnamese expansion at expense of Champa (a once-powerful Indianized kingdom located in what today is central Vietnam, populated by Malayo-Polynesian speakers), and Cambodia. Without a doubt the French inherited a Vietnamese *mission civilisatrice*.

Nevertheless, French motives for movement into

Laos and Cambodia were in essence their own, based on global politics of the colonial era (competition with the British, a dream of access to the fabled 'back door' of China). But a major argument for the extension of French colonial power to Laos and Cambodia was certainly Vietnamese claims of hegemony over these two areas.

There is also a major contributing factor in the founding of the Communist Party of Indochina in 1930, replacing the previous Communist Party of Vietnam.

The American presence in Vietnam was not conspicuous for use of the term or the concept of 'Indochina', but late in the 'American War', their extension of the war into Lon Nol's Cambodia, and the ongoing 'secret war' in Laos resulted in a return to a notion of a military theatre of war known conveniently as 'Indochina'.

The crucial point of course is the imputed continuation of Vietnam's assumed hegemonist plans for Laos and Cambodia. Historical expansion is a clear record, and Vietnam can be safely assumed to share the Chinese view of the world as hopeless barbarians surrounding a 'middle kingdom' (themselves) of lonely civilization. The crucial question is to what extent this attitude remains among Vietnamese leadership and whether or not it is ensconced in popular feelings and thought. It will take a deeper and more thorough investigation than I have prepared here, in order to answer this question definitively. Nevertheless, we can get some preliminary notions of this social force in Vietnamese life.

## Geography and Vietnamese Confucianism

Vietnam has evolved as a very unique political entity in SE Asia because of its long history of domination by China, and its isolation from the rest of SE Asia by mountainous and rough territory. Even today, the mountains between coastal Vietnam and inland Laos and Cambodia serve as a barrier. The mountains are relatively underpopulated by smaller ethnic minorities, and are only in current times being breached by modern road systems.

Vietnam absorbed a thoroughgoing Confucian system of elite culture during its 1000-years as a province of China. However, it also adapted those institutions to its own needs and understanding, and the Confucian element runs progressively thinner as one examines traditions down to the village level and further southward. Woodside (316) allows that before the 15th Century Confucianism was weak in Vietnam, especially the villages, and that authentic Confucianism was probably not practiced until the 1700s. But 'only in the



19th Century did the Chinese model fully override the original flexibility and 'looseness' - that is, the 'Southeast Asianness' - of earlier Vietnamese society' (J.K. Whitmore, in Emerson p.19).

In spite of all this on the Chinese model a sense of being uniquely civilized must be imputed to the Vietnamese officials and leadership through most of their history. It certainly appears when we look at occupying regimes in Cambodia. For example, in 1805 Vietnam required of its Cambodia tributary the same forest products that it required of intervening hill tribe groups, a calculated insult. Later, in 1834, the Nguyen court renamed Cambodia Tran Tay ('western commandery') and tried to administer it directly with Vietnamese officials. They placed a teenaged girl on the throne, imposed cadastral records, land taxes, and a census, recostumed officials, and renamed the provinces (Steinberg 124-125). Revolts broke out across the nation.

References to overt attitudes of racial superiority may not appear very frequently since Vietnamese court chronicles tend to focus on the ruler's internal goals, ideals, actions, not on his relations with 'barbarians'.

#### Vietnamese Expansion to the South



In 1600 Nguyen Hoang returned to his base in central Vietnam, giving up his ambitions to establish a new dynasty in Hanoi. This is the start of the internal division of Vietnam between the Trinh family in the north and the Nguyen family in the south. In contrast to the extreme social discipline required in the north, in central Vietnam there was relative freedom, a new context of frontier mentality and non-Vietnamese local cultures and traditions. The remaining Cham lands to the south represented a new horizon into which to expand (Taylor 42). Quang Nam, the region to the south of Nguyen Hoang, was even more fertile and wealthy, with a major international trading center at Faifo.

In fact, as the Vietnamese pressed southward they came into increasing contact with the Chams and other peoples, absorbing the worship of the Indian god Indra, and the local goddess Lieu Hanh, a matriarchal figure vigorously defended by the peasants (Than 23,57). It appears that the Vietnamese in the south were those who dealt most with the local non-Vietnamese, and were less subject to a narrow ethnocentric style.

#### French Influences in Vietnam

French control of Vietnam was piecemeal (the south in 1862, central and northern Vietnam in 1885). From the south a French protectorate was established in Cambodia and from the north French power was extended to Laos. French administration tended to rely upon Vietnamese administrators in these two nations, especially in Laos. Especially in the area of education, there were very few institutions in Laos and Cambodia, and the few top students in each country who qualified for advanced education in French went on the higher institutions in Hanoi or Saigon before going to Paris. King Sihanouk himself went to the lycée in Saigon (Chandler 1991:14).

#### Relations with Laos

Relations with Laos have been low-key for the most part, and based on occasional military adventures over the mountains in both directions, either marauding troops or bandits from the early Nan Chao Kingdom north of Laos, or Chinese Haw bandits of later centuries making incursions into northern Vietnam, or Viet armies responding to these incursions.

Vietnamese power was often felt across the border in Xieng Khouang province, which the Vietnamese called Tay Ninh and considered a source of slaves. In their ongoing struggle with Thailand for power and influence in Cambodia, The Vietnamese supported Lao resistance to



Thai dominance. The abortive attack of Chao Anou on Bangkok in 1827 was supported (at least morally) by Vietnam. Thai punitive destruction of the last vestiges of Lao independence was limited in the more remote provinces bordering Vietnam by the danger of provoking Vietnamese counter action.

The reign of King Souvanna Vongsa (1633-1694) was the high point of an extensive, powerful and peaceful Kingdom of Lan Chang. It was Souvanna Vongsa who made the arrangement with Emperor Le Thanh Ton of Vietnam to demarcate borders but apportion subjects on a cultural basis. Those people who dwelled in houses built on stilts above the ground would be subjects of the Lao King, while those who dwelled in houses built upon the earth, Chinese-fashion, would be subject of the Emperor. The Lao king also married Le Thanh Ton's daughter.

In 1983 French protection was extended to Laos, at the request of the Lao king and the recommendation of his close confidant, the indefatigable August Pavie. Thus the French colonial power inherited the role of the Lao in the ongoing Thai-Viet rivalry.

It is also commonly agreed that the French use of Vietnamese civil servants in their administration of 'benign neglect' in Laos led to an increased dependency of Laos upon Vietnam.

#### Relations with Cambodia

As for relations with Cambodia, they were distant and of low intensity until gradual Vietnamese expansion down the coast brought them ultimately in control of the remaining territory of Champa in 1720, and in this way they became neighbours of Cambodia. Unfortunately for the Cambodians, the great classical period of Angkor was coming to an end, and they were subject to military pressure from the Thais in the west, as well as the Vietnamese in the east.

Western Cambodia became part of Siam for over a hundred years, and of course the Mekong delta was acquired by Vietnam, largely by a process of Vietnamese settlement in the area, and then military support for these settlers, threatened by occasional Cambodian actions. According to some observers, this process is still ongoing today, despite the wars and intense resentment of the Cambodians.

#### Indochinese Communism

The Vietnamese Communist movement was established in Canton by Ho Chi Minh, and was subject to much factionalism throughout its early history. Ho was

not always in Vietnam to manage its affairs. At the October 1930 plenum meeting, the Vietnamese Communist Party was rechristened the Indochina Communist Party.

Vietnamese sources explained that the reason for the change was to enable the various territories of French Indochina to be dealt with by the forces of revolution as a single unit. Although that may indeed have been a factor in the decision, it is likely that the key objective was to focus attention away from the cause of anti-imperialism



to that of antifeudalism (Duiker, p. 40)

One of the implications of this labeling change was that regardless of the international aspirations of his more radical Communist colleagues (as well as the varying instruction from the Stalinist Comintern), Ho himself remained focused on relatively narrow Vietnamese goals when dealing with Vietnam itself. He was still spending a lot of time traveling Asia as the Comintern representative, and thus certainly had an internationalist view. But within Vietnam he remained committed to working toward a broad front with other nationalist or anti-colonial groups: that is, he remained a functional nationalist despite his excellent internationalist credentials. This may not be evidence of a non-hegemonist view within Vietnam, but Ho Chi Minh's views were seminal in forming (and reflecting) real Vietnamese worldviews.

#### Conclusion

In this survey it appears that the Vietnamese push to the south was motivated by the internal Trinh-Nguyen



division of the nation, an intense need for living-space, the relative weakness of the Cham occupants of the south-central coast, and the relative underpopulation of the delta region. Only secondarily was it motivated by a sense of racial superiority over the Cham and Cambodian 'barbarians'.

It also appears that the primary experiences that bond the three countries of 'Indochina' are the French colonial experience and the Communist revolutionary experience. In the former case, the generations that grew up under the French are now passing from power, and the strongest ties are those being built anew, now that some of the bitterness of the colonial experience is passing. But these are built by French tourists, business people and officials on a bilateral basis, without relying upon the Indochina concept.

In the case of Communist ties, Cambodia is no longer officially Communist, and in any case the bitter conflicts between Pol Pot's forces and Vietnam, as the first warfare between Communist countries, in fact presaged the collapse of Communism as a world system. While both Laos and Vietnam still profess

Communism and their governments remain Communist structurally, they are riding the tiger of opened market. Like all things Lao, Communism in that nation always had a sort edge. The residual 'special relationship' agreement between Lao and Vietnam does, however, still exist and constitute an ongoing bond.

Combined with Lao distrust of all neighboring powers, and the often obsessive hatred of many Cambodians toward Vietnam, there seems little to support the Indochina concept now except supremely ironic French and American nostalgia for hellish confrontations in a long-gone era.

As for Vietnamese expansionism of hegemonism, though it is China and Thailand's worst nightmare, it appears not to exist in an overt form such as a Vietnamese version of US Manifest Destiny. Thus, in this admittedly preliminary and incomplete swing through some of the historical record, I find no further grounds for an Indochina concept, and conclude that it is indeed a politically correct view that except for the ironic nostalgia, the fears of hegemony, and the linguistic persistence of the term, there is no Indochina.

#### Bibliography

- Adams, N.S. & M. McCoy (eds.). 1970. *Laos: War and Revolution*.  
 Bentley, G. Carter. 1986. *Indigenoud Dates of Southeast Asia*, in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 15:275-305.  
 Chandler, David. 1984. "normative Poems (Chbap) and Pre-colonial Cambodian Society", in *JSEAS XV* No.2: 271-279.  
 Chandler, David. 1991. *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*. New Haven: Yale UP.  
 Christie, C.J. 1979. "Marxism and the History of the Nationalist Movement in Laos", in *JSAS X* No. 1:146-158.  
 Devillers, Philippe. 1980. "an analysis of Vietnamese Objectives in Indochina", in Khien Theeravit & Alistair Brown (eds.) *Indochina and Problems of Security and Stability in Southeast Asia*. Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies.  
 Dommen, Arthur J. 1965. *Conflict in Laos*. New York: Praeger.  
 Duiker, William J. 1996. *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*. Boulder: Westview.  
 Ebihara, May. 1984. "Social Organization in 16th and 17th Century Cambodia", in *JSEAS XV*, No.2: 280-295.  
 Groslier, Bernard. 1966. *Indo-china*. Geneva: Nagel.  
 Keyes, Charles F. 1977. *The Golden Reninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia*. New York: Macmillan.  
 LeBar, F.M. & Adrienne Suddard (eds.) 1963. *Laos: Its People, its Society, its Culture*. New Haven: HRAF Press.  
 McClod, Donald G. 1995. *Southeast Asia: Tradition and Modernity in the Contemporary World*. Boulder: Westview.  
 Madrolle, Claudius. 1939. *Indochina: Cochichina, Annam, Yunnan, Cambodia, Tonkin, Laos, Siam*. London: Librairie Hachette.  
 Malleret, Louis. 1961. *The Position of Historical Studies in the Countries of Former French Indo-China in 1956*, in Hall, D.G.E. (ed.) *Historians of Southeast Asia*. London: Oxford UP.  
 Marr, David G. & A.C. Milner (eds). 1986. *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th Centuries*. Honolulu: East-West Center.  
 Reid, Anthony. 1988. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1880 volume I: The Lands Below the Winds*. New Haven: Yale UP.  
 Reynolds, Craig. 1995. *A New Look at old Southeast Asia*, in *JAS* 54.2: 419-446.  
 Steinberg, David (ed). 1985. *In Search of Southeast Asia*. Revised Edition. Honolulu: U Hawaii Press.  
 Tarling, Nicholas (ed). 1994. *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (2 Vols.) Cambridge UP.  
 Taylor, Keith. 1993. "Nguyen Hoang and the Beginning of Vietnam's Southward Expansion", in Reid, Anthony (ed.) *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era*. Ithaca: Cornell UP. pp.42-65.  
 Than Quoc Vuong. 1992. "Popular Culture and High Cul-ture in Vietnamese History, in *Crossroads* 7.2:5-38.  
 Thompson, Virginia. 1937. *French Indo-china*. Newyork: Macmillan.  
 Webster's Third New ernational Dictionary. 1976. Springfield, Mass.: G.&C. Merriam Co.  
 Whitmore, J.K. 1984. "Social Organization and Confucian Thought in Vietnam, in *JSEAS XV*, No.2: 296-306.  
 Woodside, A.B. 1984. "Mediaeval Vietnam and Cambodia: A Comparative Comment", in *JSEAS XV*, No.2:315-319.