

The Colony Writ Small: Vietnamese Women and Political Activism in Colonial Schools During the 1920s

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

French colonial rule in Vietnam (1858-1954) resulted in, for the first time, the formal education of Vietnamese girls. By the 1920s a small percentage of young Vietnamese women were enrolled in colonial schools where they learned, in addition to home economics and child rearing, the French language, French history, and French literature. As a result, they were able to read newspapers, novels, and other writings on a variety of subjects and issues. This ability thrust them into the public sphere of political debates in colonial Vietnam. A significant number of these young women were politicized in the process and expressed their political views in a number of ways, including student protests and strikes.

The Colony Writ Small: Vietnamese Women and Political Activism in Colonial Schools During the 1920s*

MICHELINE LESSARD

Abstract

French colonial rule in Vietnam (1858-1954) resulted in, for the first time, the formal education of Vietnamese girls. By the 1920s a small percentage of young Vietnamese women were enrolled in colonial schools where they learned, in addition to home economics and child rearing, the French language, French history, and French literature. As a result, they were able to read newspapers, novels, and other writings on a variety of subjects and issues. This ability thrust them into the public sphere of political debates in colonial Vietnam. A significant number of these young women were politicized in the process and expressed their political views in a number of ways, including student protests and strikes.

Résumé

C'est pendant la colonisation française du Vietnam (1858-1954) que les jeunes Vietnamiennes furent pour la première fois scolarisées. Dans les années 1920, un faible pourcentage d'entre elles était inscrit dans des écoles coloniales où elles apprenaient, outre l'économie domestique et l'éducation des enfants, la langue, l'histoire et la littérature française. Ces jeunes femmes furent donc en mesure de lire des journaux, des romans, et d'autres écrits traitant de divers sujets et problèmes. Cette compétence les propulsa sur la scène publique et les exposa aux débats politiques qui animaient alors le Vietnam colonisé. À ce contact, un nombre significatif de ces Vietnamiennes se politisèrent et exprimèrent leurs opinions politiques de plusieurs façons, en participant entre autres à des grèves et à des mouvements de protestation étudiante.

The French colonization of Vietnam began with a first military campaign led in 1858 near what is present-day Da Nang. By 1862 the ruling Nguyễn dynasty was convinced of France's superior military power and chose to sign a

* I would like to thank both the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada as well as the University of Ottawa for providing the grants necessary to conduct this research.

treaty giving France control of six southern provinces. In spite of the accord, Vietnamese resistance was immediate and was not limited to the Imperial army. A significant number of Vietnamese scholars, the nation's administrative elite, chose not to collaborate with France. Many left the provinces now under French control and made their way north where they either worked as village schoolteachers or tried to organize armed insurrections against French troops. This phenomenon, referred to as the Scholars' Resistance Movement, ultimately failed as French troops were able to gradually make their way into central and northern Vietnam. French Indochina was created in 1885 when Vietnam, and neighbouring Laos and Cambodia, signed a treaty giving France control of the entire area. Laos and Cambodia became protectorates of France while Vietnam was divided into three separate administrative areas: Tonkin in the north; Annam in the centre; and Cochinchina in the south. Tonkin and Annam became protectorates while Cochinchina was governed as a colony.

As France consolidated its rule in Vietnam, Vietnamese resistance not only continued, but actually intensified. This situation would last until 1954, when France finally gave up colonial rule in Indochina following a stinging defeat in Diên Biên Phu. Before the conflict with the United States officially began in 1964, Vietnamese historians had begun the work of forging a Vietnamese national identity, one that placed the nation's numerous independence struggles at the centre of Vietnam's collective memory.¹

Historian Patricia Pelley has noted that Vietnam possesses a "rich historiographical tradition that can be traced to the thirteenth century,"² a tradition that until the twentieth century was largely hagiographical and was focused almost exclusively on court documents and on dynastic rule. This historical tradition was modernized after Vietnam declared its independence in 1945.³ In 1953 the Central Committee of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's Communist Party named historians to a newly formed "Research Committee," one of whose aims was the "construction of history."⁴ Vietnamese historians were quick to point out that in the course of the nation's armed struggles Vietnamese women had played an important role, sometimes even taking up arms in order to fight

1 Prior to French rule, the area now known as Vietnam had been invaded, and even occupied, on several occasions, by the Chinese. There were also attacks from neighbouring Siam, the Khmer, and the Mongols.

2 Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002), 17.

3 Immediately after the end of the Pacific War in August of 1945, Hồ Chí Minh and his sympathizers made their way into Hà Nội and, capitalizing on the vacuum of power created by the prior Japanese imprisonment of French colonial administrators and soldiers, and by the subsequent Japanese defeat, declared Vietnam's independence from both France and Japan. They named their new nation the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). This period in Vietnamese history is known as the August revolution.

4 Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, 20.

THE COLONY WRIT SMALL: VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND POLITICAL
ACTIVISM IN COLONIAL SCHOOLS DURING THE 1920s

enemy armies. As a result, “Vietnam’s historical memory includes a pantheon of heroic Vietnamese women apparently willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of national independence.”⁵

Well known to historians of Vietnam, for example, are the Trung Sisters, who from 40 to 43 C.E., led armed campaigns against the Chinese army. Equally present in Vietnamese folklore and history is Bà Triêu, or Thiêu Thị Trinh, who in 248 C.E., at the young age of twenty, retreated to the mountains in order to raise an army to fight Chinese forces. In the eighteenth century, Bui Thi Xuân, as a general, had apparently participated in an armed insurrection against the ruling dynasty. She was also credited with successfully protecting Vietnam against Siamese invaders. In the early years of French rule, a Vietnamese woman referred to as “Sister Tam” allegedly risked her life by carrying weapons on sampans along rivers in order to arm the partisans of Vietnamese patriot Phan Dinh Phung.⁶

These women represent an important element in the formation of Vietnam’s national identity. Their participation in armed battle places emphasis on the fact that Vietnam has often had to contend with enemies whose armies were larger and more powerful than its own. Under such circumstances success could only be achieved by pooling all of the nation’s resources, including women. The well known and often used slogan, “Even the women must fight,” bears testimony to this phenomenon. While this memory of Vietnamese history is fairly accurate, it is nonetheless highly selective for at least two reasons. First, this representation of Vietnamese women seems to contrast sharply with another, also prevalent in Vietnamese historiography, of the Vietnamese woman bound by the chains of Confucian norms, oppressive rules of conduct for women that relegated them to a lowly hierarchical status and that demanded filial duty and obedience at every stage of their lives.⁷

Traditional Vietnam marriages were, more often than not, arranged by the parents. Polygamy was allowed and Vietnamese women were under tremendous pressure to produce male descendants. Claiming that, prior to the first Chinese conquest in 111 B.C.E., Vietnam did not have a patriarchal social structure, Vietnamese nationalist historians of the 1950s argued that Confucian

5 Micheline Lessard, “Women’s Suffrage in Vietnam,” in *Women’s Suffrage in Asia*, eds. Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (London: Routledge, 2004), 107.

6 Phan Dinh Phung is one of Vietnam’s most famous patriots of the late nineteenth century. He refused to accept French rule and chose not to collaborate with the Vietnamese Imperial Court, which had signed treaties with France. He returned to the countryside and led armed attacks against French troops. He was wounded in battle and subsequently died a martyr to the cause of Vietnamese independence.

7 These duties were often referred to as the “Three Obediences,” whereby a Vietnamese girl obeyed her father, a Vietnamese woman obeyed her husband, and, if widowed, a Vietnamese mother obeyed her eldest son. Essentially this made her a minor throughout her life.

norms had been “imported” by foreigners and that the lowly status of women had been the unfortunate result of the Chinese presence in Vietnam. Still, Vietnamese women, such as the Trung Sisters, Bà Triêu, and Bui Thi Xuân, seem to have acted against the Confucian dogma that normally relegated them to the “inner quarters” out of filial duty. As such, historians explained that their presence on the battlefield was not a transgression of Confucian norms or virtues, because in Vietnam filial duty towards the nation preceded all else. As has been noted elsewhere, such representations of Vietnamese women “did serve to propagate an image of the ideal Vietnamese woman, a woman capable of protecting both her home and her nation.”⁸ In addition, the Trung Sisters and Ba Triêu had lived prior to the adoption and the consolidation of Confucian norms in Vietnam. The representation of them as filial patriots is both a cultural and a nationalist construct. Furthermore, during the period of French colonial rule, Confucian norms were challenged by a number of Vietnamese intellectuals whose aims were national independence and modernization of Vietnamese society.⁹ The struggle for national independence became intrinsically linked to the emancipation of Vietnamese women. Vietnam’s “official” history has therefore generally interpreted the creation of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930 as the watershed not only of Vietnamese women’s emancipation, but also of their politicization, of the development of their political and class consciousness.

Second, by focusing primarily on Vietnamese women’s willingness to take up arms, on the military prowess of some of them, it becomes impossible to gauge the full measure of Vietnamese women’s contributions, the extent of their political consciousness, and the breadth of their political activism, particularly during the period of French colonial rule (1858-1954). While historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai has noted that “the importance of women’s contributions to the war effort, and of non-combat activities such as production, was publicly recognised by the North Vietnamese state during the war against the Americans,”¹⁰ such was not the case when it came to the role of Vietnamese women during the period of French colonial domination.

Although thus far largely ignored by historians, archival evidence demonstrates that in French colonial Vietnam, a significant number of Vietnamese women also participated in various political activities. They joined political parties. They formed associations. Some wrote columns in newspapers or

8 Lessard, “Women’s Suffrage in Vietnam,” 107.

9 For an in-depth analysis of the challenges to Vietnamese traditions during the French colonial period, see David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1925-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

10 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting,” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 176.

THE COLONY WRIT SMALL: VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND POLITICAL
ACTIVISM IN COLONIAL SCHOOLS DURING THE 1920s

responded to current events through letters to editors. Some risked their lives by feeding, housing, and hiding known anti-French revolutionaries. According to Vietnamese historian Trần Quốc Vương, some women, such as Bà (Lady) Điều and Bà Đo, used their situation as market sellers to provide intelligence reports to Vietnamese rebels on the comings and goings of French troops.¹¹ Others, through their small businesses (cafés, market stalls, inns), at times helped finance the activities of some of these revolutionaries. From the 1920s to the 1950s thousands of Vietnamese women travelled back and forth between Vietnam and Siam or China, where numerous Vietnamese anti-colonial parties had set up headquarters. Far from engaging only in combat roles, it is significant to note that Vietnamese women displayed, in various ways, a high level of political consciousness, and, contrary to what the current historiography would lead us to believe, a great deal of these activities took place prior to the creation of the Indochinese Communist Party.

This article proposes an examination of one specific form of political activism favoured by a number of Vietnamese women: school strikes or protests. It is argued here that the Vietnamese women who chose this form of protest demonstrated, through their actions, that they were quite conscious of the political realities in French colonial Vietnam, and that they were capable not only of mobilization but also of defiance in the face of severe political repression. While in some instances they may have been successful, for the most part they paid dearly for their political actions. In attempting to determine their motivations, the influence of leftist ideologies of course cannot be dismissed, and Vietnamese students often followed what could best be termed a global phenomenon of school unrest.¹² Student strikes were not exclusive to Vietnam. Prior to the establishment of Soviet rule, for example, there was much student protest and discontent in Russia.¹³ Closer to Vietnam, Chinese students had demonstrated *en masse* when China had been denied official recognition at the Versailles peace talks in 1919. Vietnamese students who read daily newspapers were aware of the May 4th Movement in China in 1919, and they could not help but compare their country's political situation to that of China. Vietnamese newspapers, in both French and *quoc ngu* (the Vietnamese written language), commented regularly on the political situation in China. When French colonial authorities chose to censor opinion pieces they believed to be too nationalist in

11 Trần Quốc Vương, *Truyền Thống Phụ Nữ Việt Nam (The Traditional Vietnamese Woman)* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hoa Dân, 2000), 95.

12 Between 1900 and 1930 there were thousands of examples of student unrest in numerous countries, on all continents. Most influential in Vietnam were the student protests in China, during the May 4th Movement of 1919, as well as the 1925 student strikes in China. These student political manifestations were written up at great length in the Vietnamese press.

13 Samuel D. Kassow, *Students, Professors, and the State in Tsarist Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 1-2.

tone, most newspapers were none the less able to publish news stories from various wire services, stories describing the political situation in various parts of the world. Consequently, the young Vietnamese who read these newspapers were usually well aware of what was going on in other countries as well as in other areas of Indochina.

It must also be noted, however, that the French colonial educational system itself greatly contributed to the politicization of young Vietnamese women. As the authors of a recent article on the state of gender studies in Vietnam have noted: "The Confucian tradition, which reinforced social hierarchy and patriarchal values, came to be challenged by the emergent women's movement of the early twentieth century and the French education system."¹⁴

While the education of Vietnamese girls had not been a high priority at the beginning of French colonial rule, by the 1920s the French colonial administration had created a number of girls' schools. Convinced that uneducated Vietnamese women posed a serious threat to France's civilizing mission and colonial rule itself, French colonial administrators encouraged Vietnamese parents to send their daughters to school. There were two premises involved in encouraging the education of Vietnamese girls. The first was that schooling would allow them to become literate, to become more compatible and more appropriate wives to their educated Vietnamese husbands. The second premise was that, more than men, Vietnamese women seemed hesitant to change and accept French colonial rule. French colonial officials argued that a modern, Western education would allow Vietnamese women to better understand French culture, and thereby to eventually accept the French colonial presence: "It is therefore in our best interest to give the young *annamite*¹⁵ girl a Western education, because it is the female element that ordinarily opposes our culture; it is the female element that is most attached to traditional customs."¹⁶

Furthermore, once educated, young Vietnamese women would, as mothers, transmit this appreciation of French culture and of French rule to their children.¹⁷ For the first time in Vietnamese history girls had access to formal education.¹⁸ It

14 Steffanie Scott and Truong Thi Kim Chuyên, "Gender Research in Vietnam: Traditional Approaches and Emerging Trajectories," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 30 (2007): 244.

15 The term *annamite* was used by French colonial authorities and by the Vietnamese themselves to refer to the Vietnamese.

16 *La revue du Pacifique*, 2 (1923): 207. All translations in this essay were made by the author.

17 Micheline Lessard, "Civilizing Women: French Colonial Perceptions of Vietnamese Womanhood and Motherhood," in *Women and the Colonial Gaze*, eds. Tamara L. Hunt and Micheline R. Lessard (London: Palgrave, 2002), 152-153.

18 In traditional, Confucian Vietnam, only a few privileged women had access to formal schooling. For the most part these women had been the daughters of the ruling elite and their wealth and status had allowed them to have tutors. Although they learned to read and write poetry, their education rarely translated into administrative or political power.

THE COLONY WRIT SMALL: VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND POLITICAL
ACTIVISM IN COLONIAL SCHOOLS DURING THE 1920s

is true that the curricula in girls' schools differed considerably from that in boys' schools. For the girls the emphasis was primarily on home economics and *puériculture*.¹⁹ In that respect, French colonial schools followed the metropolitan model.²⁰ By and large, most Vietnamese girls who obtained an education were expected to eventually become mothers and homemakers. Until marriage, their education would allow them to work as teachers, clerks, or secretaries. Some of the brighter and more financially privileged students were able to pursue their studies in France. One of the best-known cases is Henriette Bui, daughter of Vietnamese moderate political figure and newspaper editor Bui Quang Chiêu. Miss Bui studied medicine in France and became Vietnam's first woman physician trained to practice Western medicine.

While the schooling of Vietnamese girls was a new phenomenon that was not particularly popular, some Vietnamese intellectuals none the less encouraged young Vietnamese women to attend these schools, even suggesting: "Leave without hesitation your country in order to acquire knowledge and to study the ingenious methods of the foreigners."²¹ In most instances these exhortations were those of Vietnamese nationalists once again calling on Vietnamese women to rally to the cause of Vietnamese independence. In reality such pleas were hardly necessary because Vietnamese women had already demonstrated, in a number of ways, their willingness to resist French rule. Those who found themselves on the benches of French colonial schools were simply able to contribute by engaging in political activities common to students in a number of countries.

While in colonial schools, young Vietnamese women were exposed to French literature and French history. They were able to read Vietnamese- and French-language newspapers that encouraged political discussion and printed political ideas and debates.²² Some of these debates were centred around the issue of Vietnamese women and their role in society. Women's newspapers, such as *Nu Gioi Chung* (*Women's Bell*) and *Phu Nu Tan Van* (*New Woman*), were widely read. Debates over the question of women's equality abounded in the pages of these newspapers. As historian Shawn McHale has noted, "The authors often accepted the idea that equality between men and women is a

19 This term, used by French educators by the end of the nineteenth century, refers to the "science" of child care and child rearing.

20 For more about the nature of girls' education in French colonial schools, see Lessard, "Civilizing Women."

21 Le Hoa, "L'enseignement des filles annamites — son insuffisance," *L'Annam scolaire* (August 1927).

22 For an excellent analysis of the Vietnamese press and of the creation of a "public sphere" in French colonial Vietnamese society, see Shawn McHale, *Print and Power: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Communism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

desirable goal — but they did not accept the idea that men and women should share identical interests and occupations.”²³

In addition, the nascent Vietnamese bourgeoisie was not yet ready to abandon “Confucian ideas of hierarchy between social groups,”²⁴ which set the place of women on the social ladder. By and large, the question of Vietnamese nationalism and Vietnamese independence took precedence over the women’s question. Even the more radical nationalists argued that women’s equality could not be achieved under French rule, and that only Vietnamese independence and social revolution would eventually allow Vietnamese women to achieve equality. As a result, most of the young Vietnamese women who participated in school strikes did so not to address issues of gender, but to protest against the poor conditions in their schools and against perceived injustices. They also chose, at times, to protest on behalf of and in solidarity with their male counterparts. Their choice to do so should, however, not be interpreted as a lack of political consciousness, for even if the women’s question was often placed on the back burner, these young women were no less nationalist, no less political, than their brothers or cousins who also protested against colonial rule.

These young women were also quick to equate their situation within the schools to that of Vietnam under French colonial rule. They often heard, in the voice of their French educators, what they considered a level of paternalism akin to that expressed by the French colonial administration itself with respect to Vietnam as a whole.²⁵ They bemoaned the lack of employment opportunities or upward social mobility available to them in spite of their schooling. Many wrote petitions outlining their grievances and demanding redress. Others organized protests, demonstrations, and even school strikes. While there is no evidence that these women had expressed radical views pertaining to gender or to the question of women’s equality, the actions of these young Vietnamese women, given the context of the times and of Vietnamese traditional culture, were no less political or radical than those of their male counterparts, who also chose to challenge colonial authority. In addition, it must be pointed out that the presence of these young women within the public sphere was not only a challenge to French colonial rules, but also to traditional Confucian norms pertaining to the place of women in society. Confucian values made it improper

23 Shawn McHale, “Printing and Power: Vietnamese Debates over Women’s Place in Society, 1918-1934,” in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, eds. Keith W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca, New York: Cornell SEAP, 2002), 185.

24 Ibid.

25 It has been noted that to justify its dominion over Vietnam, France referred to the Vietnamese as their “adoptive” children. As for the Vietnamese nation as a whole, French colonizers often argued that Vietnam was an infant nation, that its political development was immature and its ability to govern itself not yet formed.

THE COLONY WRIT SMALL: VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN COLONIAL SCHOOLS DURING THE 1920s

for women to speak out, to voice their opinions or displeasure. Traditional Vietnamese culture made very little room for women in the public realm. While the number of young Vietnamese women in French colonial schools was but a fraction of the population (less than one per cent), a number of these women believed, however, that they had a role to play in a new, more modern Vietnam.

The revolutionary potential of these young women was not lost on French colonial authorities. While Vietnamese intellectuals and revolutionaries encouraged women to become more politically active, French colonial authorities seemed more aware of Vietnamese women's nationalist pre-dispositions as they tried to stem what they now believed was the too rapid modernization of Vietnamese women. The French aim of educating young Vietnamese women had been to transform them into "proper" wives and mothers, into propagandists of French culture; but soon French colonial authorities complained about the fact that access to education had led to the politicization of Vietnamese women. The fear that educated Vietnamese women, those responsible for the education of young children, might become involved in political life, explains why, more often than not, these young Vietnamese women paid a high price for their political actions. French colonial officials interpreted any form of protest as a direct threat not only to their authority, but also to French rule itself. In fact, fearing what they referred to as "concerted actions," French colonial authorities allowed the Vietnamese little or no freedom of expression, assembly, or association. As the number of strikes increased between 1924 and 1928, French colonial authorities investigated each instance of school protest to determine whether or not students were affiliated with known nationalist or revolutionary groups. Students who expressed their dissatisfaction with any aspect of French colonial policies or with conditions in their schools were deemed potentially dangerous to the security and survival of French Indochina. These young people were watched closely, as were members of their family or their friends. Students considered the organizers of protests were often expelled from school and permanently barred from taking examinations to reach the next level of study. The latter sanction made it pointless for them to attempt private tutoring or private schools as a means of re-insertion into the school system. Some had their scholarships revoked, making it impossible for them to pursue their studies. In addition to expulsion, those considered the ringleaders of protests were often also permanently barred from civil service positions, making it impossible for them to gain employment either as schoolteachers or as clerks. Private education could not overcome such sanctions, and, in any case, after 1924 the French colonial administration made it illegal to open private schools in Vietnam without official permission. Those private schools sanctioned by the colonial government were closely monitored. The young women who therefore chose to express openly their political views while in school did so at their

peril, because the sanctions levelled against them would likely permanently affect their social and economic situations.

Like their male counterparts, Vietnamese schoolgirls often protested against what they considered to be the unfair treatment of their classmates. Such was the case at the *École des jeunes filles de Saïgon* in the early months of 1926. One of the school's students, Nguyễn Thi Quang, complained that one of her French teachers had insulted her. Following an argument with the teacher in question, Miss Quang was banished to the school's infirmary. Her classmates quickly protested against this action, suggesting they would go on strike if Miss Quang was not relieved of her punishment. In order to calm things down, the school's principal sent the students in question home in the hope that they would return in a few days in better spirits. Miss Quang returned to the school a few days later and promptly apologized for what she termed her rude and unacceptable behaviour. Her uncle, who had escorted her back to the school, also publicly apologized for his niece's actions. However, neither the time away from school nor the apologies diffused the tense atmosphere at the school. In fact, Thi Quang's classmates were even angrier than they had been a few days earlier, claiming that the situation was unfair and that the entire Vietnamese nation was being, once again, humiliated.²⁶

While banal on the surface, this minor squabble between a student and a teacher had taken on a larger and much more political significance, which was further emphasized by the local press. *L'Echo annamite*, a newspaper run by moderate Vietnamese nationalist Nguyễn Phan Long, suggested that the French teacher in question had been responsible for the problems at the school since she had acted inappropriately.²⁷ The Vietnamese-language newspaper *Công Luận Báo* (*Public Opinion*), equally moderate in political tone, also blamed the teacher, who, they claimed, had been regularly making life difficult for her students.²⁸ The French colonial newspaper *l'Avenir du Tonkin* interpreted the matter differently, claiming that it was Thi Quang who had been disrespectful and that the teacher had been right to punish her.²⁹ The newspaper further justified the teacher's action by suggesting that Miss Quang's actions had been highly political in nature, given that they had been motivated by her being refused permission to wear an armband in order to mourn the death of Vietnamese intellectual and patriot Phan Chu Trinh.³⁰ *L'Avenir du Tonkin* fur-

26 *L'Écho annamite* (16 April 1926).

27 *Ibid* (12 April 1926).

28 "Tình hình trường Nữ-học đường Saigon (The Situation at Saigon's girls' school)," *Công Luận Báo* (9 April 1926).

29 *L'Avenir du Tonkin* (9 April 1926).

30 Phan Chu Trinh, a nationalist and fairly moderate reformer, was viewed by French authorities as a threat to French colonial rule. In spite of Phan's insistence on constitutional reform rather than armed rebellion, the French colonial administration worried that his nationalism would

THE COLONY WRIT SMALL: VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND POLITICAL
ACTIVISM IN COLONIAL SCHOOLS DURING THE 1920s

ther justified the school's and the teacher's actions by stating that it was likely not a coincidence that the student protest had taken place after clandestine political pamphlets had been circulated at the school.³¹

Believing that both Miss Quang's punishment and the refusal to allow them to wear the black armbands were unjust, the students then decided to bring the matter to the attention of the Governor of Cochinchina. A number of Vietnamese nationalists who agreed with the students decided to support the young women by helping them draft the proposal they wished to bring to the governor's attention.³² A well-known Saigon civil servant by the name of Nguyễn Đình Tri agreed to act as the students' representative before the Governor. Thi Quang's argument with her teacher had now come to symbolize Vietnam's colonial subjugation. The Vietnamese press reinforced this notion when it cited in its pages the insults allegedly spoken by the French teacher in question. *L'Echo annamite*, for example, wrote that the French teacher, responding to the students' demand that she be dismissed from her post, had said: "So. You want me dismissed? Well you should know that I will leave here only when I have made sure that there are no longer any *annamites* in Cochinchina."³³ The newspaper further quoted her as saying, "I will trample with my feet all the *annamites*."³⁴

The newspaper never stated that it had interviewed the teacher in question, but appeared instead to have taken the students at their word. It is therefore impossible to determine if Miss Santoni had indeed uttered those words, or insults of a similar nature; but it is clear that the students and the newspaper *perceived* Miss Santoni's attitude as synonymous with that of France vis-à-vis Vietnam, or that of the French with respect to the Vietnamese. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that while Miss Santoni was a low-level teacher, a *surveillante*, at the school, she was also a student at another local school. For the Vietnamese students, who considered themselves the peers of Miss Santoni, both her position as a teacher and her attitude toward the Vietnamese students, were an insult to them in the same way that the arrival of French civil servants, who exerted authority over Vietnamese mandarins, had been an insult to the

result in open rebellion against French rule in Vietnam. For example, in 1908 he was accused of having instigated peasant revolts, though there was no real evidence of this. On various occasions colonial authorities arrested him, released him, exiled him, and placed him under house arrest. His insistence on non-violent means and the constant "attention" paid him by colonial authorities made him another martyr for the cause of Vietnamese independence. His death in the spring of 1926 resulted in widespread, spontaneous Vietnamese expressions of mourning. French colonial authorities panicked before such outpourings of "national" grief, perceiving them, quite rightfully, as manifestations of a broad-ranging level of nationalism.

31 *L'Avenir du Tonkin* (9 April 1926).

32 *L'Echo annamite* (12 April 1926) and *Công Luận Báo* (13 April 1926).

33 *Ibid* (10 April 1926).

34 *Ibid*.

Vietnamese nation itself. *L'Echo annamite* suggested that given the fact that Miss Santoni was even younger than some of the students under her supervision, she did not possess the qualifications necessary to hold her position, let alone to punish the Vietnamese students.³⁵ Regardless of the winds of modernity that were blowing across the Vietnamese landscape, to Vietnamese steeped in Confucian tradition, French violations of “age” privileges were shocking and offensive.

In April of 1926 the incident in Saigon was one of many, as the death of Phan Chu Trinh had prompted school protests and demonstrations throughout all of Vietnam. Fearing the worst, French colonial authorities decided to ban all public displays of mourning and schools forbade students to wear black armbands in honour of Phan’s memory. French colonial authorities were well aware of Phan’s popularity, of the Vietnamese population’s affection for him, an affection made all the stronger by the perception that French colonial authorities had unjustly harassed him and accused him of crimes for which there was no proof. In Hanoi schools, it was decided that automatic expulsion would be the punishment for anyone who tried to ignore these new instructions. The students at the *École normale des jeunes filles annamites*, for example, were told they would no longer be allowed in the school should they enter wearing armbands or should they choose to engage in any other overt display of mourning for Phan Chu Trinh. In Saigon itself, despite the fact that it seemed to share the students’ perspective, an article was published in *l'Echo annamite*, written by Bui Quang Chiêu, which argued that the student protests were a serious dereliction of children’s duties, “that of obeying the wishes of their parents in the first instance and those of their teachers in the second.”³⁶ Bui Quang Chiêu was convinced that Vietnam’s modernization and ultimate autonomy depended on the existence of a Vietnamese elite and middle class. For him, mass expulsions of this burgeoning elite was nothing short of a catastrophe for the future of the country. He therefore tried to convince students to refrain from actions that would result in their banishment from higher education and from the civil service, thereby jeopardizing eventual Vietnamese independence. In spite of the sanctions and regardless of their elders’ advice to steer clear of politics, Vietnamese students at the *Lycée des jeunes filles de Saïgon* decided to pool their own money to buy cloth to be sewn into armbands in memory of Phan Chu Trinh. When the school’s principal discovered this action and forbade the students to wear the armbands, the girls decided to go on strike.³⁷ Understanding quite clearly that the sanctions

³⁵ Ibid (12 April 1926).

³⁶ Ibid (24 April 1926).

³⁷ Léon Archimbaud, “Pour une politique indochinoise libérale et ferme,” *Revue du Pacifique* (6 June 1926).

THE COLONY WRIT SMALL: VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND POLITICAL
ACTIVISM IN COLONIAL SCHOOLS DURING THE 1920s

levied against the students in question would have grave repercussions upon their futures, and upon the future of Vietnam itself, Bui nonetheless added that the “errors” of the French colonial administration were responsible for this situation since they had sown the seeds of resentment in the students.³⁸ As for the French colonial administration, it attributed the school protests to the work of what it termed were “outside agitators,” though it rarely provided evidence for this claim. It also blamed another famous patriot, Phan Bội Châu,³⁹ for having planned Phan Chu Trinh’s funeral and having organized or instigated the school strikes.⁴⁰

In May of the same year a strike broke out at the *Internat de Ben Tre*, a boys’ school also in Cochinchina. The students there were protesting the arrests of two of their classmates who had participated in an earlier strike. The students at the local *École des filles* quickly joined in. Three young Vietnamese women, who worked as teachers or as teachers’ assistants at the school, were blamed for the strike and were immediately fired from their positions. In addition, approximately one hundred students were expelled.⁴¹ One of them, a young woman teacher by the name of Trinh Thi Thiêc, wrote a letter to the newspaper *L’Annam* in which she explained that she and her colleagues had nothing to do with the strike at the girls’ school and that she was particularly concerned about the fact that the three of them had been fired prior to any investigation into the events that had taken place. She called upon the colonial administration to redress the situation by making enquiries and by reinstating her and her colleagues. Her request was made to look more radical than it may have been intended when the newspaper chose to add, under her signature, an editorial note: “Colonisation is an expression of force. That is why in a colony, the voice of the weak has no chance of being heard.”⁴²

In January 1927 a Vietnamese teacher by the name of Ha Huy Tập was transferred from his position at the *Collège de Vinh* (in central Vietnam) to a remote rural area. Tập’s students considered this transfer to be both an insult to their teacher as well as a punishment levelled against him for having ties with a number of well-known Vietnamese nationalists. Approximately 600 students decided to leave the school in protest and make their way to the office of the French *Résident* in Vinh in order to demand that Tập be allowed to stay at the school. The students maintained that Tập was not only being treated unfairly, but also that the

38 Ibid.

39 Phan Bội Châu was a reformer like his friend Phan Chu Trinh. Châu was considered more dangerous, however, since he openly and consistently advocated the use of armed struggle against France.

40 Centre des Archives d’Outre Mer (hereafter CAOM), Nouveaux Fonds (hereafter NF), Dossier 1568.

41 *L’Annam* (27 May 1926).

42 Ibid (4 June 1926).

quality of their education would suffer as a result of their teacher's transfer. Upon their arrival at the *Résident's* office, the students found themselves face to face with the police. According to the newspaper *L'Argus indochinois*, a number of students were beaten by police when they insisted on meeting with the local French administrator and when they refused to leave the premises.⁴³ The following day the strikers were joined by the students at the nearby girls' school. Worried about the escalation of this protest, French colonial authorities fired Ha Huy Tâp and arrested three students they believed had organized the strike. This action further angered the students who were joined by 500 more of their peers. Given the proportions this conflict was taking, the colonial administration ultimately backed down. Not only did it reinstate Tâp, but it also claimed he could stay at the school in Vinh. It also released the three students who had been arrested.⁴⁴

A similar situation arose a few months later, in April 1927, at Hué's *Collège Quốc Học* when students, both men and women, protested against the punishment levied against two of their classmates who had been accused of cheating. The two students in question were given a two month suspension. Their classmates wrote a petition and delivered it to the school's principal, demanding that their classmates be immediately reinstated in class. They claimed that the students in question had not cheated and that the person at fault was their teacher, who had acted unjustly and arbitrarily. The writers of the petition were immediately suspended as well.⁴⁵ Other students rallied to the cause and organized a strike. They immediately received the support of the young women at the *Collège complémentaire de Đông Khanh*.⁴⁶ The young women made their way to the offices of the *Résident supérieur de l'Annam*, demanding the release of the two arrested students. Representatives of the colonial administration refused to meet with the young women who then in turn refused to leave the premises. Eventually the police were called in to disperse the students and a skirmish ensued. In the process, four students were arrested, including one young woman.⁴⁷

The concerted effort of the students at the boys' and girls' schools and the subsequent arrests resulted in even greater displeasure among the student population of Hué. The day after the arrests, strikes were declared in all primary schools. Some striking students tried to wrest the arrested students away from the police as they were being escorted to the train station in order to take them to another city. Even though the students failed to free their compatriots, French

43 *L'Argus indochinois* (29 January 1927).

44 *Ibid.*

45 *L'Echo annamite* (15 April 1927).

46 *Thuc Nghiep Dan Bao (Industry News)* (13 April 1927).

47 CAOM, Fonds des Amiraux (hereafter FA), Dossier 44215.

THE COLONY WRIT SMALL: VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND POLITICAL
ACTIVISM IN COLONIAL SCHOOLS DURING THE 1920s

colonial authorities feared the worst and ordered all area schools closed for approximately two weeks.⁴⁸

An investigation was quickly launched in order to find the instigators of the call for a general school strike in Hué. Vietnamese-language newspapers were carefully censored for fear that articles concerning the strikes and the arrested students would further inflame matters. But once again the French-language Vietnamese press, which was less likely to be censored, provided accounts and opinions concerning these events.⁴⁹ *L'Echo annamite* stated that in addition to the arrest of one of the young women, others had been “brutalized” and “injured” by the police.⁵⁰ In order to explain this instance of student unrest, the newspaper drew parallels, once again, between the students’ situation and that of the Vietnamese under French rule. The newspaper added that strikes were a weapon often used by the weak and those in free countries, and that strikes generally ended to the satisfaction of the strikers. In the colonial context, the newspaper claimed, strikers were at the pleasure and at the mercy of colonial authorities.⁵¹ In order to maintain order in Hué’s schools, colonial authorities decided to re-open the schools one at a time, with significant delay between each opening, thus preventing what they referred to as a “coalition” of students.⁵² Meanwhile, the young woman who had been arrested was released from prison, but her parents were obligated to pay a fine for their daughter’s actions.⁵³

Two months after the strike at *Dông Khanh* school, one of the expelled students, Lê Thi Luu, wrote a letter that was published in the Saigon newspaper *l’Annam*, a letter that made the link between the situation in the school and in the colony quite clear. Referring to Vietnam’s “protectors,” she wrote:

Their attitude toward us is comparable to that of a heartless mother who, seeing that her child is about to be weaned, wants to deprive of rice by frightening it with fantastical stories. Not only do they seek to have us suffer the same fate

48 Ibid.

49 French-language newspapers owned and operated by Vietnamese were less likely to be censored for a number of reasons. First, their circulation was limited to a small percentage of the Vietnamese population, those with sufficient education to read French. Second, some of those newspapers, such as the *Tribune indigène* (later called the *Tribune indochinoise*) and *L'Echo annamite*, were run by Vietnamese considered to be sympathetic to the French presence in Vietnam. The *Tribune*’s editor, Bui Quang Chiêu, was also one of a handful of Vietnamese to be granted French citizenship. The rights and the protection that came with naturalization gave men like Bui much leeway. Third, these newspapers were also sometimes protected by the fact that they benefited from the patronage of French *colons* sympathetic to their cause.

50 *L'Echo annamite* (15 April 1927).

51 Ibid (2 April 1927).

52 CAOM, FA, Dossier 44215.

53 *L'Echo annamite* (15 April 1927).

as our brothers by gagging us or by covering our eyes, but even worse, they repress each of our expressions of solidarity toward those we hold dear. The strike that took place recently in our school provides clear evidence of my supposedly tendentious accusations.⁵⁴

Other students had been expelled from *Đông Khanh* school for having participated in the strike. Among them were Dao Thi Xuân Nhân and her sister Dao Thi Xuân Yen, as well as their classmate Nguyễn Thi Giao.⁵⁵ In addition to expulsion, these young women were, among others, subsequently placed under constant police surveillance. For example, a *Sûreté* memo sent to the *Résident supérieur du Tonkin* in 1928 informed him that Dao Thi Xuân Nhân had opened a weavers' workshop in the province of Quang Ngai and had also joined a "suspicious" women's organization. The organization in question, the *Nu Công Học Hội* (Women's Studies Association), though rather middle-class and moderate in its goals, was none the less considered by French colonial authorities to be a front for Vietnamese anticolonial activities.⁵⁶ Also present at the weavers' workshop were Dao Thi Xuân Yen and Nguyễn Thi Giao.⁵⁷

Although the Vietnamese press called on the French colonial administration to demonstrate tolerance and end the repressive measures taken against Vietnamese students, students continued to be expelled on a regular basis. Subsequently, many of them joined radical political movements. Such was the case of Nguyễn Thi Tham, who in 1927 chose to participate in a commemorative ceremony in honour of the late Phan Chu Trinh. Then only thirteen years old, Thi Tham was permanently expelled from *L'Ecole des filles de Thanh Hoa*.⁵⁸ Thi Tham would later be arrested in Hai Phong, suspected of having distributed counterfeit money, a common source of funding for anti-colonial activities. The colonial administration was unable to prove her guilt, but she was by then clearly active in the Vietnamese anti-colonial movement.⁵⁹ She was later affiliated with a well-known member of the Vietnam *Quốc Dân Đảng* (Vietnamese Nationalist Party), Phô Duc Chinh.⁶⁰

Better known is the story of Trần Thị Nhu Mân, who had first drawn attention to herself when she petitioned the then Governor General, Alexandre

54 *L'Annam* (2 June 1927).

55 *Phu Nu Miền Nam (Women of Southern Vietnam)* (Thanh Phô Hồ Chí Minh [Hô Chi Minh City]: Bao Tang Phu Nu Nam Bộ [Southern Women's museum], 1993), 40.

56 CAOM, NF, Dossier 1568.

57 CAOM, Résidence supérieure du Tonkin (hereafter RST), Dossier 2046.

58 CAOM, RST, Dossier 2257.

59 CAOM, NF, Carton 333, Dossier 2686.

60 *Ibid.*

THE COLONY WRIT SMALL: VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND POLITICAL
ACTIVISM IN COLONIAL SCHOOLS DURING THE 1920s

Varenne, to release the imprisoned patriot Phan Bội Châu.⁶¹ She was dismissed from her position while participating in the 1927 strike at *Đông Khanh* school, where she worked as a teacher. She became interested in the Vietnamese women's rights movement, becoming a member of the *Nu Công Học Hội* (*NCHH*), and later opening a women's library in Huế. While the *NCHH* could hardly be considered a radical or even feminist association by Western standards, the fact remains that many of its members were either active in or had ties with more radical left-leaning political movements. As for Nhu Man, she also worked for a while as editor for the journal *Phụ Nữ Tung San* (*Women's Review*), and was at one time engaged to Vietnamese revolutionary Dao Duy Anh. Her activities led to her arrest and a five-year prison sentence after she was accused of hiding communist literature in her home.⁶² Also brought up on charges was her secretary, a young woman by the name of Đỗ Thị Trâm, who was accused of making copies of the forbidden tracts. Previously, Thi Trâm had been expelled following a school strike in Binh Dinh.⁶³ In December 1927 Phung Thi Vy, Nguyễn Thị Tú, and Lê Thị Chât were expelled from the *Ecole normale des institutrices de Hanoi* for having engaged in "political" activities at the school.⁶⁴ Thi Vy was later arrested for her affiliation with the *Vietnam Cach Manh Thanh Niên Đông Chi Hội* (Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League), a party co-founded by Hồ Chí Minh in 1926.⁶⁵ Thi Chât was arrested for being a member of the *Đông Dương Công Sản Đảng* (Indochinese Communist Party).⁶⁶ In 1930 a young woman by the name of Le Thi Gam testified that she had become politicized at the *Ecole des filles annamites* in Hai Phong between 1924 and 1929. While there, she and her friend Nguyễn Thị Vân joined the *Vietnam Quốc Dân Đảng*. She was later involved in the assassination of a Vietnamese administrator.⁶⁷ While held in a prison in Vinh for revolutionary activities, a young woman named Le Thi Mai testified that she had been politicized while a student at the *Ecole de filles de Quang Ngai*, where she had been given access to French revolutionary newspapers such as *La Voix du Peuple*.⁶⁸ In 1930 two student teachers at the *Collège de filles indigènes de Saigon*, Dang Thi Lang and Tran Thi Sanh, were expelled for having engaged in "subversive activities."⁶⁹ In 1934 it was reported that Tran Thi Giac, who had

61 *L'Annam* (19 May 1927).

62 CAOM, Service de liaison des originaires des territoires français d'outre mer (hereafter SLOT-FOM), Série 3, Carton 131.

63 CAOM, NF, Carton 333, Dossier 2686.

64 CAOM, RST, NF, Dossier 2257.

65 *Ibid.*

66 CAOM, RST, NF, Dossier 2037.

67 CAOM, RST, Police de Sûreté, Commissaire Spécial, Procès verbal, 20 August 1930.

68 CAOM, NF, Carton 333, Dossier 2686.

69 CAOM, FA, Dossier 51182.

been expelled from the *Collège des jeunes filles de Saigon*, wrote “radical” articles in a newspaper called *Saigon*. The *Sûreté* considered Giac’s writings to be “apologies of communism.”⁷⁰

In conclusion, it would be misleading to suggest that in French colonial Indochina most girls had access to formal education. Although France made much of its educational “mission” during the 1931 colonial exhibition in Paris, the fact was that many Vietnamese intellectuals, both moderate and radical, complained that there were too few schools and even fewer Vietnamese who went on to higher educational levels. According to statistics provided by the French colonial administration itself, in 1910 there was a total of 45,646 students (boys and girls) enrolled in the official *franco-indigènes* schools. By 1930 that number had risen to 383,517.⁷¹ While this was a significant rise in a twenty-year period, it was none the less a fraction of the Vietnamese population (less than one per cent). As for girls’ schools in the public system specifically, there had been 138 in 1924 (for 9,615 girls). In 1930 there were 193 girls’ schools in all of Indochina for a total of 16,406 students.⁷² Of these 193 girls’ schools, 7 were in Laos, 16 in Cambodia, 23 in Annam, 54 in Tonkin, and 93 in Cochinchina.⁷³ In terms of numbers, these figures represent a small percentage of the population; thus the students strikes cannot be seen as broad-based. It was indeed a bourgeois, even elitist, movement, much like the initial nationalist movements or associations established by Vietnamese young men.

It would also be wrong to suggest that most young Vietnamese women educated in French colonial schools chose to become political activists. Though it is impossible to determine how many educated Vietnamese women did choose to rebel, it is safe to say, however, that there were enough of them to prompt French colonial authorities to watch closely the activities of these “modern” Vietnamese women. As the author of an article in *l’Avenir du Tonkin* wrote in 1926, in reference to student strikes, “As it must be, it was the young educated women who got the ball rolling, for the others do not have the time, since they are too absorbed by other concerns, such as sewing, housework, cooking, or blowing the noses of their children.”⁷⁴ The role played by education in the politicization of Vietnamese women was clear to French colonial authorities. In 1937 the *Commission Guernut*, charged with the task of providing an analysis of the social and political conditions in Indochina, concluded that Vietnamese girls’ schools needed to offer “practical” training and that they ought to teach

70 CAOM, SLOTFOM, Série 3, Carton 52.

71 CAOM, *Rapport sur la situation administrative, économique et financière du Tonkin*, 1930.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 *L’Avenir du Tonkin* (9 April 1926).

THE COLONY WRIT SMALL: VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND POLITICAL
ACTIVISM IN COLONIAL SCHOOLS DURING THE 1920s

subjects such as hygiene, *puériculture*, and cooking. A curriculum designed for Vietnamese girls “was to include nothing that would allow them to become interested in politics.”⁷⁵

Such an approach demonstrated a serious lack of understanding of the situation in Vietnam because by then the nationalist and independence movements were in full force. Even moderate Vietnamese nationalists were calling for eventual autonomy. There was no doubt that independence was the goal of all Vietnamese. Opinions differed only in terms of the means to be used to achieve independence, on the sort of government an independent Vietnamese state ought to have, and on the nature of future relations with France. No school curriculum could get around this reality. As for Vietnamese women, their sense of nationalism had been as strong as that of their male counterparts from the very beginning, and those who were in a position to do so contributed to anti-colonial movements. In fact, in 1929 alone, French colonial officials claimed that of the 2,277 people brought up on charges of rebellion, violence, or threatening the security of the state, 528 were women.⁷⁶ Of those, 422 were young women between the ages of 16 and 39, and 7 were less than 16 years of age.⁷⁷

In addition, one cannot limit the argument to curriculum in determining the radicalizing potential of girls’ schools in colonial Vietnam. In *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, Hue-Tam Ho Tai writes at length about the ambivalence of certain Vietnamese intellectuals, such as Pham Quynh, when it came to the issue of women’s education and women’s role in Vietnamese society. The author is correct in pointing out that the French colonial school system was not intended to create a class of Vietnamese women who would rid themselves of all Confucian constraints.⁷⁸

However, the fact that a number of Vietnamese girls were now learning to read, write, type, multiply, and train for positions heretofore held by men (in addition to learning to sew and to raise children) was itself revolutionary. Like their male counterparts, some young Vietnamese women may have been ambivalent or even confused about their role in this new society, but the fact remains that a number of those who were educated could now clearly express their nationalist sentiments in a number of ways: in schools strikes, in petitions, and in letters to newspapers. Most could communicate in both French and *quốc ngữ*, potentially giving them access to greater information. While in school, they were also confronted daily with the reality of French colonial rule and its inequities. Even at its most basic level, the required study of French history

75 CAOM, Commission Guernut (hereafter CG), Carton 24, BD 1937.

76 CAOM, Agence FOM, Carton 926.

77 Ibid.

78 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992).

made clear the contradictions between French ideals and French colonialism. It is not surprising that many of these young women became students of numerous types of political ideologies.

Vietnamese women had demonstrated early on their willingness to make sacrifices for the cause of Vietnamese independence. They had not needed the existence of socialist ideology to resist French rule. Their resistance was a clear example of political consciousness. What took place in colonial schools was a different form of politicization. In these schools, Vietnamese women, who had never benefited from official schooling in the past, could now see themselves on an equal footing with their brothers and cousins. They could read, write, and engage in political discussion. In the past, they had engaged in passive forms of resistance or they had taken up arms, but they could now use alternative means to resist French rule. As such, young Vietnamese women who chose to protest in these schools made sure to link their own personal situations in their schools with those of the Vietnamese nation as a whole. They equated what they considered to be their unfair treatment in the schools with that of the subjugation brought about by French colonial domination. They often paid a high price for their political actions and therefore merit a greater place in the historiography of French colonial Vietnam. The genius of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was not that it had politicized these young women, because they clearly were already willing to take a political stand and denounce the inequities of French colonial rule (even if they often concentrated on their own rather than on the concerns of all elements of Vietnamese society, including the long-suffering peasant population). What the ICP offered instead, with its organizational framework, its theoretical approach, was a blueprint for success.

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THE COLONY WRIT SMALL: VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND POLITICAL
ACTIVISM IN COLONIAL SCHOOLS DURING THE 1920s

Concordia, à Montréal. Ses recherches portent entre autres sur la politisation des Vietnamiennes pendant la période de la colonisation française au Vietnam, sur les nationalistes modérés au Vietnam, et sur le trafic de personnes au Vietnam pendant la domination française. Elle a copublié, avec Tamara Hunt, *Women and the Colonial Gaze* (Palgrave 2002), et a rédigé divers articles parus dans *French Colonial History*, *Vietnamologica* et *l'Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*; elle est également l'auteure de certains chapitres des ouvrages *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, *Passeurs de religion* et *Women's Suffrage in Asia*.