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Sugar and blood: the Quảng Ngãi revolt of 1930-1931

Kleinen, J.

Publication date

2014

Document Version

Author accepted manuscript

Published in

Nhân cách sử học

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kleinen, J. (2014). Sugar and blood: the Quảng Ngãi revolt of 1930-1931. In V. T. Trần, Q. N. Nguyễn, & P. Papin (Eds.), *Nhân cách sử học* (pp. 280-314). Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia-Sự thật.

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In our preface of the "Liber Amicorum" that Philippe Papin and I prepared for Phan Huy Lê's first retirement in 1999, we mentioned the important role of his lifetime partner and wife Mrs. Hoàng Nhu Lan as the éminence grise and "bậu phuông", the rear-base of his social community and large network of family, friends, colleagues and students. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

For me Phan Huy Lê became the proverbial Vietnamese umbrella of my first contacts I had in Vietnam.

From 1982 onwards we co-directed a scientific cooperation and exchange program between Vietnamese and Dutch historians and social scientists. Better known under its acronym VH-26 (Vietnam-Holland 26), it was one of a number of 'VH' university cooperation programs initiated in 1973 when the University of Amsterdam appealed to the solidarity movement with Vietnam among university staff and students, and which led to support Vietnam through science and technology.

VH 26 was unique in its way we initiated the first post-1975 cooperation agreements between Vietnamese and Western academic institutions in the field of social sciences and humanities. The programme brought a number of Vietnamese historians and social scientists to the Netherlands, in order to learn about qualitative fieldwork and historiography in the West as well as for graduate studies. More generally, VH 26 paved the way for broader cooperation and exchange between Vietnamese and Western scholars, students, and academic institutions, in the field of social sciences and humanities.

We also promoted an early sandwich formula for dissertations that turned out to be successful between the former Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam (later the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research) and the Vietnamese Centre for Vietnamese Studies in Hanoi. At the Hoi An conference in 1990, we inaugurated a trajectory for Vietnamese historians – now with the help of the University of Leiden- to learn old-Dutch for access to 17th Century Dutch East-Indies Company archival records on Vietnam.

VH 26 also brought Dutch scholars and students to study, research and teach in Vietnam. Phan Huy Lê's Center facilitated my first steps into the field at a moment that foreigners had no easy access to archives and fieldwork. The research permit that I received in 1992 to live nearly a year in a Vietnamese village was the result of Phan Huy Lê's amazing skill of diplomacy with the Vietnamese authorities. My research became a blend of historical and anthropological research. I still remember vividly my discussions with him about doing fieldwork in Quang Ngãi province, at the time that this area still suffered from wartime wounds. Two short visits in 1979 (one under the responsibility of the University of Hanoi) and in 1988 (organized by Phan Huy Lê's center and the year I submitted my PhD thesis), enabled me to reconstruct the historical past of the area. Since the thesis was written in Dutch, Lê only partially was able to see the results. The following is an analysis and evaluation of the peasant revolt in Quãng Ngãi and its adjacent provinces as presented in my doctoral study as could be based on the available documents discovered in colonial archives and supplemented by three visits to the region, the longest in 1988 when I interviewed a selected group of persons that survived the uprising. For reasons of space, I have skipped the narrative of the events as told by French and Vietnamese archival sources. Therefore I focus on the political configurations and ideological questions connected with them as far as can be traced from written and oral sources. I conclude with the socio-economic conditions of the rural environment in the late Twenties and early Thirties. Finally, an overall assessment will be made, based on a reexamination of the empirical data. My concerns are primarily historical and empirical, with the ways the revolt in Quãng Ngãi is dealt with so far (in the early nineties) in the existing reports and literature. Rather, it constitutes a reconstruction of an important event in Vietnam's recent history. As far as it can shed new light on these events, other historians can develop new insights in the study of social movements in central Vietnam. I revised it in 1991 for a paper presented at the 12th International Association of Historians of Asia (IAHA) conference on Hong Kong, but it was never officially published.

SUGAR AND BLOOD
THE QUẢNG NGÃI REVOLT OF 1930-1931

by John Kleinen
(University of Amsterdam)

Introduction

In the recent history of Vietnam, a major peasant uprising against French colonialism plays an important role. The event is hailed by the ruling Communist Party as the revolutionary "Xô-Việt Nghệ-Tĩnh" movement, a name that echoes Lenin's workers-councils of 1917. The uprising in Vietnam took place between 12 September 1930 and the end of June 1931 in a number of districts of two coastal provinces in the northern part of Central Vietnam. Thousands of peasants held a long series of peaceful tax demonstrations around the capital city of Vinh and demanded the abolition of the colonial taxes. After the initial rebuff by French troops, the leaders of the movement took over the village councils and established countervailing power centers until the wet season of 1931. The events were part of a general unrest that affected colonial Vietnam in early 1930. A mutiny of Vietnamese soldiers in the small garrison town of Yên Bái north of Hanoi broke out overnight on February 9 and led to the death of five French officers. The mutiny was inspired and led by a nationalist party, the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, molded after Sun Yat Sen's Chinese Guo Min Dang. The French responded with harsh measures arresting more than a thousand suspects and executing eighty mutineers (see Contribution 1933: II). The way Vietnamese soldiers defied the colonial authority brought about a chain reaction in the rest of Vietnam. A huge number of labor strikes and mass demonstrations in the main cities of colonial Vietnam marked the first day of May, organized by the clandestine Communist party. By 1930 the Vietnamese communists had started to build a party apparatus of an estimated 1,500 members and an unknown number of sympathizers affiliated through party-controlled mass organizations. This party was an amalgamation of various groups united by the Vietnamese Comintern agent Nguyễn Ái Quốc better known as Hồ Chí Minh and founded officially on February 3, 1930 in a safe house in Kowloon. They called themselves the Việt Nam Cộng Sản Đảng, the Communist Party of Vietnam, later changed as the Communist Party of Indochina (Đảng Cộng Sản Đông Dương) (Huynh 1982: 120 - 127).

Around May 1930 French police reported more than fifty major demonstrations, rallies and armed attacks against French and Vietnamese properties, while about forty labour strikes were signaled in various parts of the country (Dumarest 1935: 159 - 160; Contribution 1933: IV). Over the year ninety-eight labour strikes and four-hundred demonstrations were counted (Hong The Cung 1933). The political unrest was most strongly felt in the Northern and Southern part of

the colony, partly because of the location of the cities Hanoi and Saigon, but 'seditious gatherings' as the French dubbed these events led to violent resistance in a number of provinces south of Saigon and in remote areas of the central part of Vietnam. Local village notables and landlords were attacked. Among the most serious in Central Vietnam the authorities counted a bloody encounter between troops of the Indigenous Garde and demonstrators who tried to seize a sawmill annex match factory in a place called Ben Thuy near the town of Vinh, the capital of Nghệ An province, and an attack against a Vietnamese owner of a rice plantation in the district of Thanh Chương in the same province (AOM AIX 7F45, 7F46; AOMAIXNF 2688; Contribution 1933 : IV,Annexe 124-28).

In addition to the areas in the countryside of northern Central Vietnam and the Mekong delta a third centre of political unrest was reported in Quảng Ngãi province, one of the most important sugar growing regions of Vietnam. The principal goal was relief from tax payments. The revolts lasted from early September 1930 until the French reestablished their control in the second half of 1931, although in the Mekong Delta peace and order were not restored until 1933. The death toll was more than ten thousand Vietnamese and more than fifty thousand deported to labour camps or under strict surveillance of their native villages during the years of repression which followed the revolt. Most of these events have been described and analyzed by contemporaries and historians.(a.o. Viollis 1935; Tran 1960; Trung Chinh 1961; Duiker 1973; 1976; Brocheux 1977; 1983 and Huynh 1982). The peasant revolt in Nghệ An en Hà Tĩnh, better known by its official name the Xô -Việt Movement of Nghệ-Tĩnh, is also studied by students of rural social movements and political scientists who are interested in the mechanisms of social and political mobilization. It even became the centre point of the debate between the moral economists and the adherents of the rational choice approach, better but ineptly known as political economists (Tran 1960; Wolf 1969 a,b; Duiker 1973, 1976; Paige 1975; Scott 1976; Brocheux 1977; Popkin 1979; Brocheux 1983; Ngo 1978 a,b; Nguyen 1987). In this contribution I would like to focus on one peasant uprising during this period that has not gotten much attention from the above cited scholars who are mainly interested in the Nghệ-Tĩnh area. The third province that rose in revolt was Quảng Ngãi, one of the more prosperous areas of central Vietnam, a French Protectorate called Annam during the colonial period. The peasant unrest was not sparked by famine or natural disaster as was the case in peripheral Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh. There was also an external factor involved like the falling price of rice precipitated by the world depression of 1929, which stirred up political unrest in the Mekong delta. In his influential book on agrarian revolutions the American sociologist Jeffery M. Paige called the events in Quảng Ngãi province 'an interesting exception to the usual pattern of agrarian revolt in Vietnam, since it shares neither the ecological risks of Nghệ An nor the rice export economy of the Mekong delta'. The uniqueness of Quảng Ngãi province, was according to Paige, for two reasons important:

'(F)irst, in the areas where the revolt was concentrated, commercial sugar is grown interspersed with the rice crop, and second, this is the only region in colonial Vietnam where irrigation water

was sold by the owners of *norias*, or water wheels, in return for a one-third share of the rice crop. The farmers of Quảng Ngãi faced both market forces and a need to purchase water in addition to the rents and interest payments common in other areas of Vietnam, and both of these problems were exacerbated by drought and the world depression' (Paige 1975: 323). Since Paige does not elaborate on this, one wonders what kind of a peasant rebellion happened in Quảng Ngãi in 1930/31 between 8 October 1930 and the spring of 1931. Furthermore, the question remains however how these factors are interrelated. Market forces in the form of a declining raw sugar export indeed influenced the local economy, but not in the way suggested by Paige. The purchase of water by owners of the famous wooden waterwheels, the *norias* (who were at the same time the most important controllers and owners of the land) was a case in point, but the main part of the protesting peasants were landless laborers who had any land to till. There was no drought in 1930 in the region that turned to be a natural calamity like it happened in the northern part of the central part of Vietnam. The world depression affected the export of sugar, but much later than October 1930 when the revolt started.

Settings and context

While in the most accounts the uprising in Quảng Ngãi is seen as a sheer reaction to the bloody events in the Nghệ-Tĩnh area and therefore generally called 'a support rebellion' (see the views by Tran 1956; Dang Cong San Vietnam 1976: 211-212; Ngo 1978), there is much reason to support the fact that the movement in this province, and by implication in the surrounding provinces, was highly autonomous at the time. Local party historians paid during the time that I investigated the uprising, lip service to the official view that Nghệ-Tĩnh and all the other events were orchestrated by the Central Committee and channeled accordingly through the lower party echelons. Close reading of the documents and judging from the information I got in private talks with these party historians led, however, to the conclusion that many initiatives for action were taken by local persons, many of them members of the clandestine communist party (AOMAISSlotfom III [149]; Contribution IV, [6]: 77-95; Lich Su 1985: 18 ff; Bui Dinh 1985: 161; cfr. Nguyen 1987: 170-177).

Members of the Revolutionary Youth League (the Thanh Niên Cách Mạng Đổng Chí Hội) were instrumental in the building up of a widespread support among the local population of the major towns in Southern Annam like Tourane, Quảng Ngãi, Qui Nhơn and Nha Trang. Young students and pupils of schools in Qui Nhơn showed in April 1927 their anti-French feelings by walk outs, following a similar and better-known act earlier at the famous elite college of Quôcc Học in the imperial city of Huế (AOMAISSlotfom III 9 [2]). A French Secret Service (le Sûreté) report of July in the same year noticed the presence of League members in remote districts like Đức Phổ, Mộ Đức and Bình Sơn, trying to organize the local peasants. It is in this report that the name of the local party leader Nguyễn Nghiêm (1903-1930) and a son of a local adherent of the Duy Tân hội league for the first time appeared (AOM HANOI C37). Later the Sûreté signaled a mushrooming of small cooperatives and workshops where 'men and women

listened to young agitators, got advice and financial support and where the first members of the illegal communist party were made' according to the Resident of Quảng Ngãi (AOM AIX Gougal 7F30). Certain trade firms were spotted as the main centers of communist 'agitation' like the Hưng Nghiệp Hội Xá, a agricultural trade cooperative, based in Hanoi, but with several chapters in Central Vietnam like Vinh, Quảng Trị, Tourane, and Faifo (Hội An). A similar organization existed in Quảng Ngãi, called the Trung Kỳ Thiết Nghiệp (Annam Industry) and headed by a certain Huỳnh Kham, married to the daughter of Phan Thúc Duyệt (1873-1944), famous for his opposition against French rule during the anti-tax movement in 1908 (see Kleinen 1991). A workshop where lessons in sewing and embroidery were taught to females operated in the same town and was suspected of having connections with the communist party. A small support group of land laborers existed since 1927 in the district of Bình Sơn, the main sugar district of Quảng Ngãi. It was called the Đồng Nghiệp Hữu Ái, (Workers in Good Friendship) and headed by Hồ Nguyên Phong, who had been arrested before the first demonstrations started and who was later sentenced to three years of hard labour. Phong was already involved in the anti-tax revolt of 1908 and implicated in the ill-fated *coup d'etat* of the young emperor Duy Tân against his French masters in 1916 (AOM AIX 7F16 [2]).

The province of Quảng Ngãi and the other provinces in the south had as mentioned earlier their part of the turmoil that began in early 1930 by organizing strikes and peaceful demonstrations like the one that was organized in Bình Định, the provincial capital east of Qui Nhơn, on 28 April. The protesters voiced their critiques in slogans and leaflets agitating against 'the Annamese monarchy and the French exploitation of the soil by selling tracts of land to foreigners in the Central Highlands'. The fact that communist red flags were branded during these demonstrations revealed the intentions of the people involved according to the French (Contribution IV, Annexe 15; AOM AIX 7F18 [2]). Police sources also made clear that communist party cells were founded in the districts of Đức Phổ and Mộ Đức as early as April 1930. Their leader Nguyễn Nghiêm maintained contacts with two alleged party members who worked in Nghệ An and who had persuaded him to found a party cell (*chi bộ*) in Đức Phổ, his home town. Nothing is known about further communication between them although one later was identified as a member of the Regional Committee. A local party history revealed more than fifty years later that Nguyễn Nghiêm organized disgruntled members of the Thanh Niên to form a more outspoken communist organization, which later became the first party cell in Đức Phổ (Bui Dinh 1985: 137). Soon several party cells were directed by a canton committee (*tổng ủy*). A number of of these cantonal committees formed a district committee (*huyện ủy*). About twenty persons were according to the French Resident estimated to use the term of address, comrade (*đồng chí*) which means that they were party members. The Sûreté put their number on eighty. More than twelve hundred peasants were supposed to be connected to a union called Nông Hội (the Peasant Union) and a known front organization of the Communist Party (AOMAIXDAP 7F38 [47]; Contribution III: 114-117). Communist documents confirmed that around June 1930

the actual number of members was about seventy-five distributed over twenty-six party cells while the number of adherents of the peasant union was twelve hundred. In the course of 1931 the number of members grew to three hundred in 110 party cells and the number of adherents of the organizations amounted to seventeen thousand (Bui Dinh 1985:137;147; Lich Su 1985:46-47).

How these local organizations were connected to higher levels was for mostly known to the French secret police, thanks to informers and squealers of the party itself. The Communist Party of the province was headed by a Provincial Committee (*tỉnh ủy*) that took orders from the Regional Committee (*xứ ủy*) in charge of the regional branch of the Party in Annam (*Đảng bộ xứ Trung Kỳ*) and the representative of the Central Committee (*Trung ương Đảng*). The Provincial Committee of Quảng Ngãi came into existence not earlier than June 1930, but it is still unclear if the Regional Committee has been founded the same month or later during the last quarter of 1930 (for a discussion see also Nguyen 1987: 170 -177).

According to French sources, Nguyễn Nghiêm worked for the *Société des Transports d'Automobiles du Centre Annam* (STACA), an enterprise responsible for the transport of passengers and goods between Qui Nhơn and Tourane. In this capacity he was able to travel around without much harassment and control by the local militia and French military (AOM AIX Gougal 7F 45). His widow revealed to me during a visit to the province in 1988 that her late husband was a small landowner in Đức Phổ having in his possession three hectares of rice lands, which was above the average at that time. He sold his land to start a transport firm with which he intended to make more money than with his agrarian activities. He bought a passenger van of the French brand *Citroën* and started his own transport firm.¹ Nghiêm's father Nguyễn Tuyên was a celebrity in the province because of his antecedents as a former leader of the reform movement Duy Tân Hội which led the anti-tax revolt of 1908 against the French. Tuyên was sentenced for many years (Nguyen 1973: 57; Boudarel 1969: 38). In early 1930, Nguyễn Nghiêm as a member of the Thanh Niên Liga came into contact with party members from Saigon and Vinh. His wife was also a militant from the beginning. He never had the chance to see his daughters Nguyễn Thị Nga and Nguyễn Thị Diệp, who were born while he was in French custody.

The fact that the main party leader of Quảng Ngãi belonged to the landowning class is not surprising when compared to the phenomenon that the leadership of the ICP came mainly from the scholar-gentry group. The Secret Police revealed that at least twenty percent of a list with more than four thousand 'main suspects' interrogated by their agents after their capture in several provinces belonged to this group. One of the so-called 'blood-groups' which later composed the Communist Party was the Revolutionary Party of New Vietnam (Tân Việt Cách

¹In 1988 I was not able to find any proof of Nguyen Nghiem's license needed to operate a firm like STACA nor the drivers' permit every Vietnamese at the time needed to drive a car. It is still possible that the licence and permit were given under a false name (see for the long list of holders of a drivers' license and permits to operate a transport firm: AN SAIGON RSA/HC 1511).

Mệnh Đảng) founded by former political prisoners who had survived the prison of Côn Lôn (Paulo Condore), because of their part in the movements of 1908 and 1916. The Tân Việt-group later joined the ICP, but its home base was Annam (AOM AIX Gougal 334 [2688; 2689; 2828]; Marr 1976: 244; Huynh 1982: 120-123). An estimated another ten percent was capable to read and write, although the majority of the prisoners were classified as 'illiterate' (AOM AIX 7F5 [21] [22]). According to the same reports, an overwhelming majority (eighty percent) was dependent on agriculture included the small artisanal workshops in cities like Vinh, Tourane and Qui Nhơn. Fifteen percent was classified as jobless, while five percent worked for the French or Vietnamese government as teacher or as civil servant (AOM AIX 7F5). The investigators of the Morché-commission stated in their final report that as far as Quảng Ngãi was concerned 'the majority of the demonstrators were landless workers' in spite of the fact that 'the Party was less influential here, but adherents could be found among anti-French activists of 1908 and 1916, while also returned soldiers from WOI were involved'(AOM AIX 7F45 [38]). The same investigators boasted that the revolt failed for two reasons: the fact that the province was not isolated, compared to Nghệ-Tĩnh, and gave easy access for the transport of colonial troops. The second reason was that the local economy was not as bad as in the North, which has been proved by the rapid collection of taxes in 1931 (AOM AIX 7F38 [3]).

Background of the rebellion.

Students of the revolts in Annam have pointed out the various reasons why the principal regions of revolt were those where natural disasters were most likely to undermine the general structure of the traditional subsistence economy. The period of extended drought that struck the provinces of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh at the second half of 1929 and which continued through 1930 brought acute famine and increased the burden of the landless peasants (Castagnol 1930). Since the French had imposed a system of taxation wherein the peasants had to pay in cash in lieu of kind, the harvest failures aggravated the indebtedness and the frantic search for cash to meet the tax bills. The head of the colonial agricultural department, the French agronomist Yves Henry testified for the Commission of Inquiry, charged with investigating the background of the rebellion and named after its chairman, the Commission Morché: 'the main reason for the troubled situation in Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh has to do with poor harvests. For two years the land has produced nothing. Four harvests have been devastated' (AOM AIX 7F 46 [144]). Referring, however to the situation in Quảng Ngãi, Henry declared: '(T)he harvest without being very good have been close to normal. The economic situation in (Quảng Ngãi) was, however, not brilliant, thanks to the decline of sugar' (idem). 'Close to normal' is the agronomist's way of saying that the spring crop in 1931 was damaged by drought, but not lost. Vietnamese witnesses for the same Commission declared that the harvest of 1930 had been 'bad', and that of 1931 was damaged by drought' (testimonies of the Provincial Counselor and the district chief of Đức Phổ, in AOM AIX 7F 46, [123],[136]).

The effect of the drought alone on the natural environment cannot explain why the revolt should have centered here. The coastal provinces of Annam were known to be vulnerable to

natural calamities. Typhoons and drought belong to the regular hazards of the subsistence economy, although the north of Annam is much more often hit by natural disasters than the more prosperous south. Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh provinces are known as the most ecologically dangerous and least productive areas in Central Vietnam, and probably in Vietnam as a whole.

Land and social differentiation

In his major study based on a colonial survey of landholding, Yves Henry found that rainfall in the Northern part of Annam is one of the most irregular (Henry 1932: 32). But the pattern of landownership and land distribution during colonial time differed not much between the North and the South of Annam. French official writings perpetuate the fiction that a fragmentation of the land and the dense population created a region of small landholdings worked by marginal subsistence farmers; the same myth accounts for the impression that an important part for communal land tenure was left in the villages and that there were also a few large land holdings. And finally, that rent in kind on the basis of a ration which varies from one-third to half of what was understood as a 'normal' harvest was the predominant pattern, although share-cropping on a fifty-fifty basis occurred more in Annam than in the north of Vietnam.

Henry estimated that 93,8 percent of all holdings were of less than 2.5 hectares and that there were only fifty one holdings of over fifty hectares (1932: 144-145). Since seventy to ninety-five percent of the holdings were directly worked by their owners, the general impression is that Annam was a part of Vietnam where small-holding dominated (see also Paige who repeats Henry's findings 1975: 289 -290). Exceptions were the neighboring provinces of Quảng Nam and Bình Định with proportions of owner-operated holdings of forty and sixty five percent respectively (Henry 1932: 119; 147). Tenancy, however, was growing, according to Henry who accounted for a great deal of the labour arrangements between owners and cultivators.²

This picture proved to be at odds with reality. Given the fact that these landowner/cultivators represented only 655,000 'owner-operators' whose households had an estimated average number of five, and thus encompassing a population of 3,275,000, we easily can conclude if we take into account that the population of Annam was estimated at 4,7 million at the time that Henry conducted his survey, roughly 1,5 million inhabitants (about 285,000

² The colonial economist Bernard estimated in 1934 that 68,5 % of those who claimed to be small holders cultivated less than 0,5 hectares while 25,3 % (Henry's total of 93,8 %) cultivated less than 2,5 HA and claimed ownership over it. This was only 293,000 Hectares of total rice area, which was estimated to be 800,000 Hectares up to 1 Million (when double cropped). The rest was distributed as follows: 6 % 'owned' between 5 and 25 hectares amounting to 174,000 hectares, while a minority of 0,6 % belonged to the category of big landlords, controlling or owning more than 50 hectares each (133,00 HA). About 200,000 Hectares (25 % of the total cultivated land area) was designated to be communal and distributed temporarily by the village councils (Bernard 1934:7). These patterns of land 'ownership' were repeated in the South Vietnamese census of 1960 (Nguyen 1963: 45).

households) of Annam are not accounted for and must have been landless at the time.³ The urban population was too small to affect this estimation seriously. But there is much better evidence to assess the incredibility of official French published sources. According to Henry he admitted himself during questioning by the Morché-commission that 'in many provinces 50 % of all the households neither owned nor possessed land at all'. Vietnamese provincial counselors who worked closely with the French, went even further and declared that in the districts where the protests were the most numerous (Đức Phổ, Bình Sơn, Sơn Tịnh, and Mộ Đức) landlessness amounted 'from the half to three quarters of the rural population who has no land at all' (AOM AIX Gougal 7F45 [120-123]). Resident Lavigne admitted reluctantly that 'a quarter to one third was landless' but added that the population was 'relatively prosperous' compared to Nghê-Tĩnh (AOM AIX Gougal 7F45 [113]). Other testimonies pointed out that in several districts of Quảng Ngãi many more landlords used sharecroppers and rent tenants than was known from Henry's investigation. Sơn Tịnh-district counted 'several' landlords controlling more than fifty hectares of agricultural land, while about fifty owner-operators claimed to possess an area over twenty-five hectares. Two years earlier, in 1929, Henry counted only five with land between twenty-five and fifty Ha (AOMAIXNF 2691; Henry 1932: 134 -135). Henry explained the reasons for this polarization by the traditional practice of under registration and the concealment of the land titles by members of the village councils and their allies, the mandarin-officials in the district offices. As long as the French got the tax amounts they hoped for on the basis of the number of registered taxpayers (*inscrits*) on the official tax rolls, they did not care about the real situation within the villages. For the same reasons they took the question of the communal rice and dry lands (*công điền* and *công thổ*) for granted. As Paige rightly comments: '(T)he presence of communal lands within the Vietnamese village might seem a possible economic base of communal solidarity, but in fact these lands seldom promoted cooperation' (287). Yves Henry's findings that communal lands constituted on an average twenty five percent of the rice area in Annam as a whole proved to be at odds in Quảng Ngãi where in reality only eleven percent were recorded as 'communal' (1932: 33; 120 -144).⁴ But even this low share can be contested, since we know that communal lands were not only the least desirable, but also they were cultivated as tiny individual subsistence plots. The council of notables administered these lands collectively, but in many cases landlords took advantage of it by forcing the beneficiaries (the landless

³The data on the population and the average size of households is taken from the Vietnamese demographer Nguyen Thieu Lau whose outstanding work as a member of the *Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient* deserves to be mentioned (Nguyen 1941: 183 -185). See book by PHL' s daughter.

⁴ Henry used as a baseline a French translation of an Imperial Tax Account dated 1897 (today kept at the AOMin Aix, AOM AIX Amiraux 22169) which estimated the area of communal lands in Annam at 274,000 hectares (40 %) of the 661,000 hectares of total rice lands. In 1929 the total area was nearly 800,000 hectares of which 195,000 hectares were designated as communal (25 %). Official estimations in 1938 pointed out that this percentage had decreased already to an average of 16 %. In a rare candid mood, the Higher Resident of Annam revealed in a note for a parliamentary Inquiry Commission that *more than half of the eight thousand villages of Annam did not possess any more a single square meter of communal land* (emphasis added) (AOM AIX Annam B3 and Guernut Bi).

villagers) to rent them out to themselves who then added the land to their own plots. In fact, many communal lands were counted as privately controlled, without any official administration. Higher Resident Le Fol warned his subaltern officers not to intervene 'in the redistribution of communal land' because this bears the risk to antagonize the village elite 'the only group that *de facto* has an interest in keeping peace and order' (AOM AIX Gougal 7F 38 [1]; see also Scott 1976: 132).

The transition from smallholders to tenants and sharecroppers in the colonial period is not documented because of the general absence of sources, connected with a widespread lack of interest on the part of the colonial administrators. It is nevertheless important that French colonial officials like Yves Henry and René Dumont observed an increasing tendency of small proprietors to rent out their lands to members of the village councils or their allies who belonged to the rich landowning elites of the community. In most cases this was the result of debt peonage caused by economic or financial constraints (Henry 1932: 60 -61; Dumont 1935: 47 ff.). The director of the land credit bank of Quảng Ngãi, Maurice Sureau, pointed out to the Morché-commission that many owner-operators lost their land after they had signed 'a mortgage contract' to get the necessary credits for their farms without excessive interest rates as was the rule with Chinese and Indian moneylenders (AOM AIX SE 171). Nevertheless, the arrangement led in many cases to the appropriation of the land by the moneylender when the advanced sum had not been repaid (AOM AIX Gougal 7F38 [6]).

A factor that must have aggravated the economic situation was the sale of irrigation water to landowners and cultivators. Irrigation water was sold by the owners of norias, or water wheels, in return for a one-third share of the rice crop (Paige 1976: 323). Norias provided the water that was needed for the rice fields, most of them were located near the fertile banks of the rivers. The literature on the norias is mainly technical (Guillenminet 1926). Little is known about the social arrangements resulting from the ownership and control of these water wheels. An early observer estimated that at least 'one tenth of Quảng Ngãi's population' profited from the construction and maintenance of the bamboo installations, while about 'ten thousand people' were directly engaged. Individuals, families and village organizations could decide to build a noria when water was needed to irrigate rice fields on the higher parts of the banks of the river. After completion they could sell or rent it out to a third party, but the structure was always temporarily used during the growing season.

The majority of the norias, which totaled 128 in 1928, was built along the Trà Khúc river, Quảng Ngãi's main water road and can be seen until the present time. Individuals or families who owned or operated a noria (*bờ xe nước*) did so for many generations and acted as specialists. The biggest installations needed about seven persons to maintain and to watch the steady flow of water to the field. There is, however no evidence, that these arrangements resembled the famous *subak* system in Bali as observed by Grader (1960) and Geertz (1980).⁵ The noria could also be owned and maintained by big landlords who rented it out to their smaller

⁵ For a recent description see <http://quangngaihouston.wordpress.com/2009/01/09/bờ-xe-nước/>

colleagues. Between owners and village councils contracts were made how much land had to be irrigated for a certain period. Payment was always in kind and taken from the yielded crops. In French documents the impression prevails that owners of a noria differ from the landowners, but clear evidence is lacking (AOMAIXNF: 335 [2692]. Sharecroppers had to pay at least one-third of the crop in payment for the water, but no further detailed information is available about the relation between (small) landowners and the owners of norias or about the noria owning landlords who could monopolize the arrangements.

Since maize and sugar crops don't need much irrigation, little to no water is needed to fertile these fields. In times of great drought, however, water was often used by norias for this type of crops. The delivery of water was paid for in money in case of cane sugar and in kind in case of maize. The existence of bad harvests caused by drought during 1930 and 1931, as reported by the testimonies for the Morché Commission, aggravated the work of the noria owners who had to supply the water needed to irrigate the paddy fields. Although no allusion by the Commission is given, there is reason to believe that the noria system saved at least a part of the rice crop as far as water was available from the rivers, but aggravated at the same time the burden of the recipients of the water. However, 'a crop failure didn't occur', as Yves Henry pointed out (AOM AIX 7F [144]).

Taxation

The increased demands for taxes and rice caused many small holders to ask for cash money and increased the rate of tenancy. As was said earlier, the practice of communal land distribution proved to be an instrument in the hands of the village elite to maintain their hold over the poorer villagers. A phenomenon known as 'sublease' (*bán huy tiển* in French sources) caused debt peonage and subsequently tenancy. Communal land was offered to the poor and landless, but by imposing a much higher amount of land taxes than was arranged, rich landowners paid for the taxes and rented the lands out to a third party, not necessarily the intended original recipients. A practice better known to the French was the deliberate inflation of the number of recipients of communal lands by the notables in order to sell these lands to other landowners at a profit, who subcontracted them to tenants (Ory 1894: 74-94; Dumont 1935: 77-81; Gourou 1936: 369-379; Gourou 1940; see also Popkin 1979: 150; Paige 1976: 288-189 and Nguyen 1987: 104 -106). There is no evidence that the question of colonial taxation played a more important role in the cause of the rebellion in the province of Quảng Ngãi than it was in the case of Nghệ-Tĩnh. The involvement of the peasants of Central Vietnam in the wider colonial economy was confined to the urgent need for cash to pay colonial taxes. The French reinforced the power of the village elite by imposing tax cards for those who were registered on the tax rolls and which served as identification cards. Resident Lavigne boasted not to have heard a single complaint about taxation by the captured Nguyễn Nghiêm when he personally interrogated him about his intentions to lead the revolt (AOM AIX Gougat 7F45 [113]). Like it was the case elsewhere in Vietnam, the annual basis amount of 2,50 piasters for personal taxes was augmented by several additional taxes ranging from levies on the use and selling of certain products and the rights of using transport facilities to the buying of the fatigue, a traditional tax

duty. All together these additional taxes could increase the annual sums to four to five piasters instead of the legal basic amount of 2,50. Landless laborers needed at least between twelve and fifteen days of work to pay the minimal amount of three piasters personal tax which included the already mentioned additional taxes. Owner-operators were confronted with a heavily ambiguous land tax based on the presumed productivity of the soil. Again, there is no reason to assume that in Quảng Ngãi these taxes were more resented than in Nghệ-Tĩnh. By controlling the internal distribution of the taxes, the notables again had an opportunity to enrich themselves. Cases of extreme misuse reported to the French administration or to the censored Vietnamese press were not followed by juridical measures. The official Vietnamese newspaper Tiếng Dân (Voice of the People) for example reported already in 1927 a serious case of elite abuse in the village of Phú Long (Quảng Ngãi), where 4,5 hectares of private lands were taxed by the notables with an extremely high sum of piasters per unit. Complaints stayed to no avail and the small owner-operators were forced to pay (story cited in AOM AIX Gougal 7F16).⁶

A practice that never totally disappeared was the *corvée*. Originally an imperial prerogative, the French encouraged the Vietnamese authorities to put these duties on the villagers for their own (and French) account. A number of eight days a year remained to be rendered by every villager to the local or provincial authorities in order to work on the repair of roads, to be on patrol for government buildings or to facilitate transport of Vietnamese officials or their colonial masters. Especially the use of coolie-labor for road repair or the construction of railroads based on the so-called *thuế ích*, the duty to work for the government, was resented much.

Sugar and Labor

What complicated the labor and land arrangements in this province was the growing of sugar for commercial reasons combined with wet rice cultivation. The province had a cultivated agricultural area that totaled about 52000 ha in 1929. Of this area, about seventy percent was planted to rice (irrigated and rain fed) and twenty five percent to sugar. The remaining five percent was devoted to other crops like maize, tobacco, tea, sesame, hemp, groundnuts, and ramie. Maize replaced sometimes the planting of sugar, but it never became as important as in neighboring Quảng Nam. The fact that in Quảng Ngãi sugar and rice was planted simultaneously makes the province according to Paige unique, but he does not give us any indication why this uniqueness is so important for the explanation of the social unrest. In traditional and colonial Vietnam, sugarcane has been cultivated in an intercropping system where next to the main crop at higher parts of the fields sugar cane was planted. Maize was sometimes additionally planted as a third crop, but mainly seen as a substitute for rice. Colonial statistics

⁶ *Tiếng Dân's* editor in chief was Huỳnh Thúc Kháng (1876-1947), a former member of the People's Assembly of Annam. Representation of the local elites was a French attempt to promote French-Vietnamese cooperation. Kháng was one of the main leaders of the anti-taxes revolt against the French in 1908 (see Nguyen The Anh, 'Huỳnh Thúc Khang and his newspaper Tiếng Dân', paper for a Harvard workshop on early Modern Vietnamese literature, June 22 -26, 1982).

suggest a increasing export for rice in southern Annam since 1928 declining sharply after 1931 (Henry 1932: 366-367). It is not clear whether these exports came from the region or from the Mekong delta. Brocheux pointed out that many landlords and rice traders used the internal market of Annam to get rid of the excess production or shipped rice quota through the harbours of Qui Nhơn and Tourane (Đà Nẵng) (Brocheux 1976; 1977). According to Henry, Quảng Ngãi, for example, was supposed to export more than two thousand tons of rice in 1928 which was tripled in 1929 and even went to 8500 tons in 1930, after it fell back to 178 ton in 1931 (1932: 366 -367). These exports were in no way based on the actual surplus production of paddy in the province. The production per capita was estimated by Henry approximately 230 kilograms of paddy rice, which left 150 kilograms for consumption. The colonial demographer Kherian estimated that the average consumption of Annam in the 1930' s seldom exceeded 152 kilograms, which was slightly better than in Tonkin (1937: 21). The inhabitants of the An Kim district in Quảng Ngãi told a colonial administrator that according to their memory more than three-quarter of all the harvests between 1927 and 1937 were 'bad' or even 'worst' (AOM AIX SE H 62 [250]). According to a Vietnamese proverb 'only the third and the eight month produce rice and potatoes' (*tháng ba ngày tám ăn cám với khoai*, (literally to eat bran with potatoes in the third month and the eighth day = in other words, this is the season when there is no rice available, the period between the two rice harvests!) quoted by Nguyễn Văn Huyền in AOM AIX Gougal DAP [53501]). The rice exports must have come from extractions of landlords and rice sales by tenants themselves or from the Cochinchinese rice traders. The dramatic decrease in 1931 is probably more caused by the political events than by the effect of the world crisis.

Contrary to the insufficient rice production, the production and refining of sugar cane was an important cash generating activity in Quảng Ngãi. It has to be stressed that the sugar growing and production in Quảng Ngãi and in colonial Vietnam at the whole was at a primitive level, and that up to the late Fifties no industrialized milling system came into existence. The yield per hectare did not exceed an average of thirty to forty tons during colonial time, and the whole industry could be labeled as artisanal. Primitive sugar ovens were seen all over the province, while from hardwood presses driven by water buffaloes the sugar cane liquid came.

According to a report of the Agricultural Credit Bank of Quảng Ngãi, the export of raw sugar started to decline after October 1929, when the world crisis started and came to a complete standstill at the end of 1931. The most visible effect was the reduction of the sugar exports to Hong Kong where Chinese middlemen shipped the raw sugar for refinement. The export from Quảng Ngãi's most important port Thu Xà (near the old Cham harbour Cổ Lũy) fell from 2,030 ton in 1928 to 1642 in 1929 to an appalling low amount of ninety ton in 1930. In the meantime landowners and wholesale buyers, mostly Chinese, could minimize their losses by channeling their production to the other parts of Indochina via Tourane. Only after 1932 did the export of raw sugar to Tonkin came to a complete standstill. After April 1930 the acreage for the cultivation of cane sugar was diminished, because sugar cane production decreased considerably. The Director of the already mentioned Credit Bank pointed out that 'an important part' of the

estimated 14500 hectares was not planted anymore to sugarcane (AOM AIX SE 171-Report Sureau).

The families that cultivated the land offered planting for commercial sugar growing. Since sugarcane cultivating generates less work, as it is an annual crop, much more labor is needed for the cutting and the transport of the cane (Arceneaux 1954). The practice to hire the workers who planted the land to cane was abandoned since the landowners did not take care any longer of the provision of cane-sprouts. There is no written proof of what happened to tenants who were supposed to clear areas for sugarcane and who prepared the field now for the planting of maize. Henry and Sureau suggested that the number of hired laborers declined drastically from the moment the sugar cane planting and production only served the domestic needs at home (Henry 1932: 527; Sureau [1937] in AOM AIX SE 171). The owneroperators needed labour and capital to plant the sugar cane. The decline in exports forced them to reduce the acreage, which led to a drastic decline in hired labour. This situation was aggravated by the return of labourers from the rubber plantations in the south to the congested delta areas in northern and central Vietnam (Robeqain 1944: 213-218; Brocheux 1975: 655-667; Murray 1980: 241 ff and Brocheux 1990). One of the main conclusions of the Morché Commission deserves to be quoted at length: The districts which are the most contaminated by communism are those where the land is fertile and the landowners are in a well to do situation, but where large numbers of badly-off farm-laborers also abound. They formed the rank and file of the illegal syndicate *Nông Hộ*, which was responsible for the organization of the demonstrations (AOM AIX Gougal 7F38 [3])

CONCLUSIONS

The exception to the usual pattern of agrarian revolt in Vietnam, to which Paige refers, lies in the fact that the revolt of *Quảng Ngãi* was neither caused by ecological factors nor by the effects of a rice export economy which was responsible for a pattern of social relations wherein landlords and landless tenants prevail. The combination of market forces, a severed local economy, bad weather conditions and the belated effects of the world depression can be taken as responsible for the outbreak of the revolt, but even so the growing transition of landholding to tenancy, which is however seldom a cause in itself for an open rebellion. A factor that rarely is touched upon is what I call 'the climate of anti-French resistance' in the region. Memories of the still not forgotten squealing of the tax-revolt of 1908 and the aborted *coup d'etat* attempt of 1916 against the French led by the young emperor *Duy Tân* urged members of an older generation to join the anti-French forces, but also influenced the minds of a new, more radical generation. I tried to make plausible that all these factors influenced the events, but that neither of them proved as strong as to foment an open rebellion against the French colonial state. Especially the weather conditions and the world depression did not have the impact Paige suggests as they did in his analysis of the *Nghệ-Tĩnh* revolt or the Communist inspired unrest in the Mekong delta. Paige's assertion however that 'the decentralized share-cropping systems are the most receptive to revolutionary socialism' needs revision, when applied to the events in *Quảng Ngãi*. Critical reading of the chapter dealing with Vietnam reinforces the impression that either small holders or

landless laborers answer to the appeals of revolutionary movements, but this impression runs counter to Paige's assertions (cf. also Skocpol 1982 a,b). According to Paige a combination of geographical marginality and the attachment to the land do not pose a favorable environment for revolutionary movements. Paige is right in his assessment of the situation in Tonkin 'which was not involved in the revolt' and 'where the pattern of marginal subsistence holdings and oligarchic village control was strongest' (323).

But a closer look at the events in Quảng Ngãi reveal at least that Paige's own theory has to be reconsidered. *Agrarian Revolution* stresses the importance of sharecropping systems as the most receptive to revolutionary claims of outsiders who asked for a change of the colonial system. Landlords acting as rent-capitalists were more willing to give in to the demands of these groups, because they are totally dependent of the labour of these tenants and laborers. It is difficult to say given the unsuccessful results of the movement in Quảng Ngãi whether this happened or not. For a convincing explanation of the success of Communist movements, we need more than the economically based factors Paige pointed out to create a non-existent political class that proved to be sensitive to the cause. In Quảng Ngãi landless labourers were organised by a party whose leadership belonged to the scholar-gentry group. And this same group had through family ties or because of personal involvement a memorized culture of an anti-French posture. That is at least to be taken into account.

Seen in the light of later events, it is ironical that not the Mekong Delta became the most enthusiastic center of Communist support as Paige suggested, but the coastal provinces of Central Vietnam. It is even more ironical that this support came especially after 1975 and was given by well-trained and seasoned cadres who proved to be totally uncompromising toward the local population. Quảng Ngãi (and to a lesser degree Bình Định) retained a commitment to the past, but this commitment took the form of a reckoning, partly caused by the French repression and the subsequent bloody events after 1954 (see also Marr 1997). Those provinces belonged to the most contested areas of the Vietnam War (Donnell 1967; Sheenan 1987). It is also believed based on my own observations that the agrarian collectivization movement in these provinces after 1975 was performed in a harsh and uncompromising way. Subsequently, the current effects of the economic liberalization seem to be the least here. One can wonder, rereading Paige's *Agrarian Revolution* for whom this revolution actually was fought.

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AOM AIX -Archives nationales, Dépôt des archives d'Outre-Mer d'Aix-en-Provence.

AOM AIX Gougal Fonds des Amiraux et du Gouvernement général.

AOM AIX Guernut Archives of the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission inserted in the Gougal Archives.

AOM AIX SE Direction des Affaires Economiques du Gouvernement général, dit 'Service Economique'.

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