CHAPTER TWO

UPLAND NORTHERN VIETNAM

This chapter is a general introduction to colonial highland Tonkin and its populations intended to set the cultural background of the ethnographies presented in this book. It begins with an outline of the history of the northern highlands from imperial times to French colonial rule. A picture is then drawn of the highland ethnic situation during the French watch, using the French ethnic categories. Finally, the situation as it stands today is exposed, this time using the official Vietnamese categories. This last section gives a measure of the demographic significance of the region and the 5 million or so mountain dwellers found today in this part of northern Vietnam.

The Red River delta and its mountainous periphery correspond, by and large, to the former French protectorate of Tonkin. It is a fan-shaped territory centred on the capital city, Hanoi, which sits at sea level, with a gradual altitude increase as one proceeds along the rays of the fan. At its highest point, close to the Chinese border, this territory peaks at just over 3000 metres.

Today, the ethnic diversity there compares with what it was when the French arrived in the late 19th century, and the locations where the various ethnic groups dwell have remained largely unchanged. This is not to say though, that these ethnic groups have always inhabited the area. History and archaeology tell us that of the actual indigenous societies of northern Vietnam, very little remains. The bulk of the lowland population today is formed of Viet migrants who arrived from China a few centuries B.C. The Proto- and Deutero-Malay migratory waves that preceded the Viet have been virtually wiped off the lowlands and the coastal areas and pushed to the highlands where they are still represented today by Austronesian and Austro-Asiatic speakers. Then, in the highlands, came the Tibeto-Burman and the Tai-Kadai speakers from central-eastern China between 1000–2000 years ago on their way to today’s Thailand. Over the last five centuries came the Miao-Yao speakers, that is, the Yao and, within the last 300 years, the Hmong. Any such substantial in-migrations practically ceased with the closure of the international borders when the French took over Tonkin in the
1880s, quickly followed by territorial and population control even in
the remotest parts of the Annam Range.

Prior to the late 19th century, archives in Vietnamese and Chinese
languages or what has been written about them in English or French,
show very few traces of these politically minor peoples, except when
addressing ad hoc administrative and trade problems, whilst modern
historians such as Lê or Ngo rarely touch on them.¹ Without significant
home-grown written records produced by these highland societies and
without a sufficient number of decisive archaeological studies, what is
left of their early history in upper northern Vietnam is scarce.

Since the foundation of the early lowland kingdom of Van Lang
in Vietnam in the 7th Century B.C., interactions with the hinterland
and the kingdoms to the north and the west, beyond the Vietnamese
portion of the Southeast Asian massif, were either defensive when an
attack was launched, offensive when a neighbour was to be subsumed,
or commercial in times of peace. By the start of the second Lê dynasty
in the 15th century A.D., nearly all of the Black River (Sông Đà) catch-
ments and part of the upper Red River (Sông Hồng) bore the generic
label of Hưng Hóa, while Tháp-châu was the name for the 10 châu of
An-tây prefecture, covering a large portion of the remaining area on
both sides of the Sino-Vietnamese border. Sub-prefectures bore either
the name of huyện or châu. In the huyện, the head was a mandarin sent
from Hanoi; in the châu, indigenous chiefs were kept in place, report-
ing directly to the provincial governor. In a way, one could say that
ethnic differences were thus known, yet as long as the state’s objectives
were met in terms of taxation and military draft in the châu, the ethnic
identity of the local leader was considered irrelevant.

In his study of Vietnamese public institutions in the 18th century,
Dang stresses that at the time, the northern frontier and the peoples
inhabiting it were, at least nominally, under the responsibility of the
Vietnamese Ministry of the Armies (Binh Bô). The peripheral and
mountainous districts they occupied still bore the names châu and huyện.

d’Extrême-Orient, 1996. For an account of the preserved pre-19th century Vietnamese
archives, see Dang Phuong-Nghi, Les institutions publiques du Viêt-Nam au XVIIIe siècle,
1969, pp. 23-31. See also an early Chinese account in Ma Touan Lin, Ethnographie
des peuples étrangers à la Chine, 1883, a 13th century text translated from Chinese and
annotated by Marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denys.
But both were now administered by Kinh mandarins sent to live on location, called respectively Tri-huyện and Tri-châu. In the northern region in the 18th century, there were 44 such highland châu and 163 lowland huyện, which indicate that a fairly large proportion of the territory was actually still classified as remote. Due to the larger proportion of Kinh population in the huyện, it can be assumed that the system worked more smoothly in these districts than in the more distant châu. Ultimately, at its maximum extension, this system’s only remaining purpose was to locate existing villages, administer the census for military draft and corvées purposes, and try to tax the population in proportion to the surface of terraced rice fields they owned. Consequently, the long settled and agriculturally very active groups closer to the Delta like the Tai speakers and the Muong were fairly heavily burdened while all the remoter and more mobile groups in the mountains, like the Miao-Yao speakers, practising dry rice cultivation on swiddens, largely escaped direct state control.4

But who exactly were the inhabitants of these highlands during pre-colonial history? Were they the same as those met by the French from the mid-19th century onwards? Very little evidence has been uncovered to provide a satisfactory answer to these questions. Historian Nguyên Thê Anh states that until the 17th century the montagnards in the upper catchments of the Red River Delta were generically called Man without further distinction, as was also the case in large parts of southwest China.6 The Vietnamese state control in the region was limited to administrative and military centres along the main river and land routes leading into China. It did not control the vast mountain ranges

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3 ‘Kinh’ is used here as a convenient shortcut to designate the lowland Vietnamese, whom we can also call ‘Viet’. No further ethnic distinction amongst the lowland population will be made in this book.

4 Unlike the official listing in Vietnam today, but in accordance with the official Vietnamese linguistic classification of National Minorities, all the groups belonging to the Tai language sub-family, when addressed collectively, will be called Tai in this text.


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separating these routes. The border zone was more akin, in the minds of the lowland powers, to a ‘no man’s land.’

The Northern Highlands in the Late Imperial Era

We turn now to an examination of the general conceptions of the mountainous north and its populations by the lowland powers in the 19th century, firstly by the Imperial Vietnamese, and then by the arriving French colonists.

In the north-western highlands, more precisely in the upper valley of the Black River, the Thái town of Muang Lai, today’s Lai Chau, is known to have existed since at least the Mongol invasions in the late 13th century, with the loose federation of Sip Song Chau Tai, the Twelve Tai Cantons, later formalised around it. Paying tribute to Luang Phrabang at certain times, to Burma or China at other times, it was eventually brought under Hue’s influence. Hue, the Nguyễn dynasty’s stronghold, had become the new capital of Vietnam at that time. Nguyễn Anh, also known as Emperor Gia Long, established modern Vietnam in 1802 and convinced China, its overlord, to acknowledge its new form, including the mountainous areas in the north.

In turn, when he visited these highlands in the late 1880s, French diplomat Auguste Pavie briefly described the feudal society there, and stated that he had no doubt that the Sip Song Chau Tai were dependent on the Court of Annam (as Hue’s government was known to the French). Not only the Tày (then called Thô) in the Clear River (Sông Lô) area closer to the Delta, but also the Thải of the Black River valley were paying tribute to Hue. Abuses by the state under the Nguyễn in the 19th century caused more than 400 registered rebellions against the regime. At least one of these rebellions involved montagnards in the north in a bold act of opposition to the state. In addition, the Taiping uprising in China (1851–1864) pushed Chinese gangs into Upper Tonkin where they harassed the montagnards in the Thái Nguyên region. At the same time, famines struck mercilessly.

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7 Nguyên “L'image de la piraterie,” p. 67.
9 Lê Histoire du Viêt Nam, 383.
A systematic study on the history of the highland minorities in Vietnam would require that the documents prepared and published under the Nguyễn be seriously scrutinised in search for clues on the highland populations that dwelled on the margins. Gia Long’s *Nhất thông du-dịa chí* (General Geography) for instance was completed in 1806. In this work, the principal roads of the Vietnamese Empire were described along with the limits, the main produce and the cultural customs of each province. Gia Long’s son, emperor Minh Mang, initiated in his time the production of the *Dai Nam liệt truyện* (Biographies of Dai Nam) which chiefly included information about the aristocracy and the great people of the Empire, but also famous rebels, some of whom might have been from non-Kinh ethnicity and living in the mountains. Emperor Tự-duc next produced over 1865–1882, in several volumes, what Lê Thành Khôi has labelled the best work on the geography of Vietnam, the *Dai Nam nhất thông chí*. Among many other dimensions, this monumental work informs for each province on the populations and famous local historical figures. Also potentially useful for the north is the *Dông-Khánh Địa-du chí lược* produced in 1886 by Huỳnh Huu Xúng, which includes several maps noting the details of the recent expansion westwards under Minh Mang.

But for our purpose here, a briefer assessment will have to suffice. Drawing upon many 19th century writings in his research on the history of Vietnam before the French, Lê Thành Khôi provides useful additional information about the highlands in that century. He notes that under Emperor Gia Long, the central government ministerial structure that was active under the Lê dynasty had been maintained, now controlled by six ministries. In administrative terms, the northern region was granted the right to a distinct political existence (*Bắc Thành*) and state pressure was kept to a minimum there for several years in order not to fuel the anti-Nguyễn feeling in a population that had long been connected to the Lê, whom the Nguyễn had overthrown. During this early period of unified Vietnam, Bắc Thành had 13 tran, or provinces.

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10 Ibid., 357–8.
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(renamed tinh under Minh Mang). The tran were divided in phu, prefectures, themselves sub-divided in huyện (for the lowlands) and ch中国的 (for the mountains) as was the case prior to this new administration, then in tổng (cantons), and in xã (communes). As in the 18th century, the cantons and communes were granted particular autonomy and were administered by local chiefs co-opted by local prominent men, subject to provincial scrutiny. Historian Lê Thành Khôi does not give the number of provinces in the north nor does he name them or give the precise location of those incorporating the mountains. Only one clue is given upon discussing the rules of draft for soldiers, when he mentions “the ten ‘exterior’ provinces were inhabited by mountain peoples.”

If we are to believe the general map provided by Lê Thành Khôi, which shows the extension of Vietnam under Minh Mang (1820–1841), it appears that the official inclusion of the northern mountains into the empire extended only to the mid-region, the foothills and the mid-valleys of the rivers flowing from the north, a region essentially populated by Tai speakers. Even within the controlled mountainous region, it is probably safe to assume that the higher reaches and the populations dwelling there were not very solidly attached to the central state. It is more likely that the Tai speakers, already traditionally in contact with the higher up populations, were acting as middlepeople between the very high region and the delta. Knowledge of these elusive montagnards of upper Tonkin by the Viet was probably filtered through the feudal Tai, and no Viet felt they really needed to know much more than that to conduct the affairs of the state efficiently. Nevertheless, imperial Vietnamese military parties would occasionally be dispatched into the northern mountains to restore order when caravans and trading posts were threatened by banditry. This occurred especially in the second half of the 19th century when wandering rebel groups appeared en masse, pushed out of the Chinese periphery by insurrectional movements in Yunnan and Guangxi.

The town of Lào Cai (‘Old Market’ in quan hoa), for example, a rudimentary settlement and trading post conveniently located on the banks of the upper Red River at the Yunnan border, known to have existed since at least the 17th century, was not under direct Vietnamese control. It was observed by French adventurer and trader Jean Dupuis

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13 Ibid., 348.
14 Ibid., 365.
in the 1860s that armed groups of Cantonese merchants were installed in Lào Cai.\footnote{McAleavy, Henry. \textit{Black Flags in Vietnam. The Story of a Chinese Intervention.} London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1968, 5,107.} Even though such merchant parties also conducted some local trade with montagnard dwellers,\footnote{Essentially providing them with salt and metals bartered for forest products and, after the mid-nineteenth century, raw or boiled opium.} this local trade was only marginal compared with the long haul circulation of merchandise between Yunnan and the Delta.

Beyond the general administrative expansion of the state, what exactly was the Hue policy towards the montagnards prior to the French takeover? Was it structurally different from the political and economic dependency in which the Hue court, its mandarins and their local representatives, kept the peasants of the Red River Delta? Probably not. We know that Hue’s rulers did not hold the highlanders in the highest esteem, maintaining a pejorative attitude toward those ‘primitive’ mountain dwellers. The Muong and the Thô (Tày), because they had, with time, become culturally closer to the Kinh, were considered superior to other highland groups. With the latter, “it generally was believed that familiarity held the danger of polluting superior Vietnamese ways”\footnote{Hickey, Gerald C. \textit{Sons of the Mountains. Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1934.} New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982a, 154.} and inter-marriage with state functionaries or employees, for instance, was stated in the 15th century Lê code as punishable.

It could be said that Imperial Vietnamese, and the French colonial regime that succeeded it, shared at first a common political understanding of the highlands in the north. To summarise that conception in a single word, it was that of a frontier. A geographical one obviously, due to the mountainous topography, it was also a geostrategic frontier, a buffer zone between different lowland states or, in the case of Yunnan, upland Warlords and non-Han monarchs with enough power nevertheless to pose a potential security threat to Tonkin.\footnote{Winichakul, Thongchai. \textit{Siam Mapped. A History of the Geo-body of a Nation.} Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1994.} In addition, it was a cultural frontier, with upland populations being linguistically, genetically and ethnically distinct from the lowland Viet majority, while at the same time forming neither a unified cultural and political entity nor a confederation of independent elements. It is not an exaggeration to state that the northern uplands also represented, from the lowlanders’ point of view, a distinct religious entity and an unchartered mythical
territory with specific ghosts, spirits and malicious evils. Typically, mountain people were categorised as a bizarre mixture of humanity bearing uneasy characteristics: unruly, dangerous, in touch with the otherworld, practising barbaric rituals, a lesser kind of humans. This harsh appreciation of the montagnards mirrored a widespread human tendency found by countless ethnographic studies around the world, one that makes Us civilised and the Other barbaric, and this rule did not fail to apply in the Southeast Asian massif. The highlands there were thus not a space to be dealt with lightly, and colonising them was not seen as a necessary step; it was rather one to be avoided as long as feasible, preferably indefinitely.

**Under French Rule**

Despite the initial similarity in the conception of the highland zones, when the French colonial apparatus actively started taking over Vietnam in the mid-19th century, a significantly different approach to the uplands was implemented. Not that the French were less biased towards highland populations; in Europe itself the persistent division between the ‘civilised’ plains and the ‘uncivilised’ uplands—and of course the forest—was an ancient and persistent defining feature. However, following the Enlightenment, the naturalistic vision of human diversity had implanted in French thinking a durable vision of cultural relativism and, later, social evolutionism. The ideological foundations were then well in place to take French colonial perceptions of the highlands away from that of old imperial Vietnam.

In terms of geopolitics, France’s will to impose direct rule over Vietnam entailed the implementation of Western notions such as the Nation-state and territorial sovereignty. The first obvious step in this political control of the new colony was the need to occupy the territory and subject its populations, and then set clear and solid borders of the national territory. Negotiations and a short war with China led in 1885 to bilateral agreements on an international border between

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20 Incidentally, the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 is contemporaneous with the French takeover of central Vietnam.

21 For convenience, I use the term colony generically here; Tonkin in the late 19th century was actually a Protectorate.
French controlled Tonkin and south China. To the West, Auguste Pavie’s diplomacy eventually led to the recognition of French pre-eminence over the Lao territory east of the Mekong river, while the ancient Tonkin-Laos border in the mountainous area west of the Black River was formalised. The highlands conquered, and their political limits set, all that was left to do was to firmly attach the populations to the colonial state.

The northern uplands, a harsh, barely accessible maze of mountain ranges and high valleys populated by alien minorities, did not offer promising enough economic or political potentialities to justify a colonial presence on a magnitude exceeding the simple safeguarding of the heartland, the Red River Delta. Accordingly, the French authorities preferred to keep a minimal number of troops in the highlands, just sufficient to guard the borders. Any increase in this minimal involvement was met with blunt rejection from the successive Governor Generals of the time. Infrastructure to access the region was also kept to a minimum, and was calibrated to support the military installations in the north. During at least the first decades of colonial French Tonkin—the period covered in this book—entrepreneurs and missionaries wanting to penetrate the highlands were to do so mainly at their own expense and risks, with minimal logistical support from the colonial administration except when accompanying the troops.

During the whole of the colonial period, French policy towards the northern highlands and its populations did not deviate significantly from this initial stance. Alliances with more or less significant highland potentates, such as the White Thái of the Sip Song Chau Tai, would suffice to ensure political control and economic exploitation of the desirable resources. Actual administration was confided to the military. This pragmatic approach was coherent with the cultural distinction that the French more or less openly admitted that they saw between the civilised European colonists, the somewhat civilised Annamite (Vietnamese) culture, the barely civilised Tai-speaking feudal groups in the mid-region, and the truly ‘savage’ tribal groups perched in the highlands. A symptom

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of this cultural hierarchy in the French psyche is reflected in the proportionate number of articles devoted to each of these categories by French scholars which were published over 50 years in the prestigious *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient*. Official terminology also bore this distinction, geographically dividing Tonkin between the Delta, the mid-region (*la moyenne région*), and the high-region (*la haute région*). Administratively speaking, the provinces in the Delta fell under the direct administration of the civilian colonial state, while a large portion of the mid-region and all of the high-region were put in 1891 under military administration—the *Territoires Militaires*.

In this book it is the high-region that is the main focus of interest. In the French understanding, that region comprised nearly all the Tonkinese territories immediately adjacent to Laos and the Chinese border. Although under military administration, the coastal areas in contact with Guangxi in the extreme east of Tonkin were not part of it, and as such, it was the combination of highlands and border area that actually defined the high region. Thus, it can be said that the high region comprised all land above 500 metres, along a half-circle that had the Red River delta at its centre, and stretching from the province of Lạng Sơn to the east, to Sơn La in the west. Today, these would correspond to the provinces of Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng, Hà Giang, Lào Cai, Lai Châu, Điện Biên, and Sơn La, with adjacent portions of Yên Bái, Tuyên Quang, and Bắc Kạn. The river valleys cutting through this vast periphery of mountains were the main access roads, while a circular road, the Colonial Road no. 4 was swiftly built along the Monkey—Langson—Cao Bang axis to safeguard the most active section of the Chinese border.

**Peoples of Upland Tonkin Towards the End of the 19th Century**

During the early years of the colonisation of Indochina, it was first through second hand accounts by Vietnamese informants and the reports of a handful of European observers that the existence of montagnard groups in the Southeast Asian massif began to be known to the French. Spearheading the colonial penetration of northern Vietnam, occasional explorers like Francis Garnier and Ernest Doudart de Lagrée in the 1860s, and Jean Dupuis and Émile Rocher in the 1870s, rowing their way up into Yunnan via the Mekong and the Red River, reported
sightings of unknown peoples who they generally depicted as primitive, colourful enough to be portrayed, but without much commercial interest. A clear sign of this lack of knowledge was the general map produced by Garnier that accompanied the publication on his expedition of 1866–68. This map, titled *Carte générale de l’Indo-Chine* (General Map of Indo-China) showed the highlands in the north and west of Tonkin bearing the labels ‘région inexploité’ and ‘région à peu près inconnue’—yet to be explored and virtually unknown regions. A further illustration is provided by another map authored by the *Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris* and published with accounts of early attempts to make contact with potential converts in the mountainous north. This map shows the little known high region of western Tonkin bearing the mention *tribus sauvages*, savage tribes, without further specification.

For the specific purpose of this book and to reduce to a minimum unnecessary complications, the ethnic diversity of the northern region, which amounts today to more than thirty different ethnic groups and sub-groups according to some authors, has been standardized along the broad ethnic categories that are most often found in the French colonial literature. It seemed more sensible to bear with the unavoidable imprecision and colonial overtones of some of these ethnonyms that characterized the writings of the turn of the 20th century. Therefore in the following chapters we will work with the categories most often found in the official French ethnonyms and ethnolinguistic taxonomy,
and hence, in the missionary writings of the time. Today’s official Vietnamese classifications will be presented in the next section so as to give the reader an appreciation of who these people are in the present, but it should be kept in mind that these groups are not consistent with colonial categories. Just to underline the taxonomic complexity in the uplands, here is a sampling of issues at stake. Colonial authors tended to confuse the Nùng, an important Tai-speaking group on the Guangxi border, with the ‘Thô’, their more numerous cousins and neighbours. But the ethnonym Thô was later allocated instead to a small Viet-speaking group dwelling in the Annamitic Range while the colonial ‘Thô’ were given back their rightful autonym, the Tày. Farther west, most of the time the Red Thái and the Tai Lue on the Laos-China border were mixed up with the more numerous Black and White Thái, their close relatives in Tonkin; concurrently, some Tibeto-Burman speaking groups such as the Lolo were wrongly classified into the Tai-speaking family. Nearer to Hanoi, the Muong, close relatives to the Viet, were often registered as Tai speakers while they actually belong to the Viet-Muong linguistic branch. Such confusion of specific identities cannot easily be solved. To try to decide, retroactively, to which categories the peoples colonial authors were mentioning should belong to in today’s ethnolinguistic categories would be a hazardous enterprise, with shaky scientific grounding and a good risk of error.

Bearing in mind the taxonomic predicament, today we nevertheless have a fairly reliable picture of where the main ethnic groups of highland Tonkin were located at the time of the arrival of the French in the 1880s. The Carte Ethnolinguistique published in 1949 by Service géographique de l’Indochine under the supervision of École française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) summarizes this information in broad terms. Although this map is posterior to the French conquest of Tonkin by a good sixty years, its state of sophistication and its incorporation of the best available linguistic findings of the time, combined with the maximum extension of the French exploration of the Indochinese territory, make it the most detailed and overall accurate visual representation of the distribution of ethnic groups in all of French Indochina. The ethno-linguistic categories it uses were proposed and debated by the scholars of the time, and formed thereafter the basis for colonial ethnic classification of the Indochina population. As far as Tonkin was...
concerned, these linguistic categories amounted to nine: *Vietnamien, Muong, Thai Laotien, Thai, Nung, Sino-Tibétain, Môn Khmer, Man, and Méo*. This French colonial categorisation, when completed with the specific ethnonyms indicated on the map, shows a logic that allows one to target with reasonable accuracy the sub-categories and to connect them in broad terms with today’s linguistic classifications. I will therefore use this French colonial linguistic categorization as the main structure to list and present the ethnic diversity present in upland Tonkin at the time of the arrival of French missionaries.

*Vietnamien*

The French had long favoured the name *Annamites*, from Annam, to label the lowland majority called Viet or Kinh today. But when it came to naming the linguistic family, the French equivalent to Vietnamese, *Vietnamien*, was preferred. Today, the Vietnamese language is associated with the parent language Muong in the cluster Viet-Muong, a sub-branch of the Austro-Asiatic family. On the 1949 EFEO Map, the location of the Vietnamese speakers chiefly overlapped with all land situated at altitudes lower than 200 metres.

*Muong*

As just mentioned, the Muong belong to the Viet-Muong sub-division of the Austro-Asiatic family. On the EFEO map, all Muong speakers were located in the western foothills of the delta, in and around today’s Hoa Binh province.

*Thai laotien*

This small category belongs to the Tai branch of the Tai-Kadai linguistic group. Linguistically, these Thai Lao are directly related to the Lao speakers of Laos. The EFEO map suggests that the river valleys tributaries of the Mekong, in particular the higher reaches of the valley of the Nam Ou, might have led some Thai Lao to install settlements in Tonkin, although none appears on the 1949 map.

*Thai* (Thô [Tày]; Black, White, and Red Thái; Thái Neu, Thái Lue, Thái Phong, Phouthai, Nyang)

The major portion of the Tai-Kadai family represented in Vietnam, this group moved to Mainland Southeast Asia from China between one and two thousand years ago (perhaps more in the case of the Tày).
Spreading today over northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, northern Burma and southwest China, Tai-speakers have, thanks to their relative isolation from each other, developed over time an array of related languages that eventually gave birth to different ethnic groups and ethnonyms. In Tonkin and eastern Laos, the EFEO map registers 9 Thai groups, most straddling that border. This is the case for the Thai blancs, the Thai noirs, Thai rouges and Thai neua, all of whom are found both in western Tonkin, that is west of the Red River in the Black River and Song Ma watersheds, and east of the Mekong river in Laos. The Thái Lue are shown to dwell along the Chinese border (Yunnan). East of the Red River are the ‘Thô’ [Tày] who occupy a half-circle around the lowlands of the Delta all the way to the coast along the border with China (the Chinese provinces the French called the two Kouang: Kouangsi and Kouangtong). Upriver from them are pockets of less numerous Nyang spread along the Yunnan border between the Red River and the upper Clear River.

Nung

An unnecessary category much like the Thai laotien, the Nung (today the Nùng) should be grouped with the other Tai speakers listed as Thai. They constitute part of the eastern branch of that family along with their cousins in Guangxi, the Zhuang, the most numerous Minority Nationality in China. On the EFEO map, all the Nung are located east of the Red River along the Chinese border, with a concentration in the provinces of Langson and Cao Bang.

All these Tai-speaking groups (Thai laotien, Thai, and Nung) had in common the fact that they dwell at intermediate altitudes between the plains and the mountains. They occupied the moyenne région favouring the lower slopes of river valleys and plateaus between 200 and 800 metres. In terms of political organisation, the Tai groups represented a transitional stage between kinship-based systems of the uplands, and fully-blown feudal organisation in the lowlands, with an aristocracy ruling over peasant masses. In certain areas like the Black River, the Tai-speaking villages and towns were inter-connected through a feudal-like, loose agrarian political regime composed of relatively independent principalities under the suzerainty of a Tai lord. Whatever the precise state of their political formalisation, the Tai were in tributary relation-

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ships with their more powerful neighbours: imperial Vietnam most of the time, but also the Lao kingdom of Luang Phrabang, and powers as remote as Burma and China.

These Tai-speaking groups all formed peasant economies based on subsistence-oriented horticulture, wet rice cultivation, and trade. The bulk of this trade concentrated on regional marketplaces attended chiefly by other Tai speakers, where cash crops such as rice and animal produce like eggs and meat would be exchanged. Due to their location at the periphery of the Red River delta, the Tai groups were also in a favourable position to act as intermediaries between the Viet and other traders coming from afar, such as other minorities higher in the mountains, or long haul traders from Yunnan and Guangxi. The Tai speakers controlled the river valleys leading into the hinterland and they saw fit to take advantage of this in terms of taxation and control over the flow of goods.

At the time of French installation, Animism was important among the Tai, with influences from Chinese belief systems such as Taoism and ancestor worship. The Kinh had implanted in the nearest Tai groups a mixed aristocracy involving Kinh mandarins who had married locally and whose descendants acted as power brokers in the mid-region. The Kinh used these elites as go-betweens to plant the seed of acculturation in the Tai groups, although the ultimate goal was political and economic subjugation, not cultural merging.

Sino-Tibétain

This is another composite group although far less numerous than the Tai-speaking group. It is called today the Sino-Tibetan language family. In colonial times, in northern Vietnam it included a number of sub-groups: the Chinese and Tibeto-Burman sub-families, the latter including the Lolo-Burmese groups. The EFEO map locates pockets of Sino-Tibetan speakers at the extreme north-west and extreme east of Tonkin, the former including the Houni [Hani], and the Ho [Haw, Hoa, Hui], and the latter, the Kho, essentially lowland Han speakers around Moncay.

Môn Khmer

The only group listed on the EFEO map as dwelling in Tonkin and belonging to the Mon-Khmer sub-category of the Austro-Asiatic family are the Mœo (today the Khmu). They dwelt in their larger numbers in Laos while very small extensions penetrated into extreme western Tonkin.
Belonging to the Miao-Yao branch of the Austro-Tai linguistic family, the Man (a Chinese exonym) are known internationally as the Yao today, although it may be more accurate to name the ones dwelling in northern Vietnam Kim Mien, their autonym. They form one of the most recent migrant groups to have entered Tonkin from China.

Méo

This name was derived from the Chinese exonym Miao and was used to refer to the other, more numerous branch of the Miao-Yao family. The particular branch of the large Miao group in China—nearly ten million in total—that can be found in Vietnam today is the Hmong.

The EFEO map locates the Sino-Tibetan Man and Méo at higher altitudes than the Tai groups, up to 2000 metres. Their habitat was therefore limited to the higher northern reaches of the main river valleys and to the summit areas in the upper-region, the haute région.

At the time of the French takeover, all the non-Tai and non Viet-Muong speakers dwelling in Tonkin were practising either nomadic swiddening or a combination of swidden and sedentary agriculture. All had their economic systems based on subsistence agriculture complemented by limited trade aimed at acquiring the indispensable items that could not be produced in the mountains, such as salt, iron, silver, or gun powder. Their trading partners included other minorities in upper Tonkin, but it is undoubtedly with the adjacent Tai-speaking groups in the mid-region that trade flourished. With lowland Viet being the ultimate buyers of forest produce, coffin-wood and opium, the Tai-speakers were in a strategic location to impose their role as intermediaries between the highland embedded minorities and the lowland majority.

In terms of political organisation, the non-Tai and non-Viet-Muong groups had a kinship-based structure with no political formalisation beyond the kinship group or, on occasions, the village. None of these groups had yet been reached and/or successfully converted to one of the main religious traditions that had taken root in the Peninsula. They were Animists, although syncretisms with Chinese philosophical systems were frequent, especially among the later migrants from China like the Hmong and the Yao.
THE SITUATION TODAY

For several decades after the French departed from Tonkin in 1954, no Western anthropologists, linguists, or historians, at least no non-Communist ones, could study highland minorities dwelling in the mountain ranges circling the Red River delta. When the official decision was made in 1986 by the Communist Party to open up the country to the market economy—a liberalisation process known there as "Đổi Mới," the 'economic renovation'—Vietnam gradually welcomed again foreign scholars from all political allegiances. Very slowly at first, then at an accelerated pace thanks to a relaxation in the early 1990s of the controls over the circulation of foreigners outside the main cities, huge areas previously inaccessible to non-authorised researchers became the focus of new research. Today, in the country’s northern highlands, in addition to Vietnamese ethnologists working for the State, dozens of local and foreign researchers as well as research students are climbing the hills to study some of the five million or so non-Kinh highlanders living there.

Vietnam recognizes five indigenous linguistic families within its borders, each comprising several minority groups. These are: the Nam-A family (Austro-Asiatic), with the Viet-Muong (4 groups including the Kinh) and Môn-Kho-me (Mon-Khmer, 21 groups) branches; the Nam-Dơ family (Austronesian or Malayo-Polynesian, 5 groups); the Thai-Kadai family (Tai-Kadai, 12 groups); the Sino-Tibetan family, with the Sinitic (3 groups) and the Tibetan-Burman (6 groups) branches; and finally the Hmong-Dao family (Miao-Yao, 3 groups). Of the 54 'nationalities' (các dân tộc) officially catalogued in the country, 53 are considered 'national minorities' (các dân tộc thiểu số). The 54th group, the Kinh, forms the national ethnic majority with a population of 65,795,718 in 1999.

At the 1999 census, the 53 official national minorities of Vietnam represent 10,527,455 individuals, or 13.8 per cent of the national population. However, as four of these are simply overspills from lowland majorities in neighboring countries, they should be subtracted from this total. These are the Hoa (Chinese), Kho-me (Khmer), Cham, and Lao, who together record a total population in Vietnam of 2,062,029. Thus the total of highland minority representatives in Vietnam, sometimes

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called các dân tộc miền núi or người miền núi (the mountain people nationalities) becomes 8,465,426, or 11.1 per cent of Vietnam’s population. Roughly two-thirds of these are found in the northern highlands. Of these 49 highland groups, the six largest numerically in 1999 were the Tày (1,477,514), the Thái (1,328,725), the Mường (1,137,515), the Nùng (856,412), the Hmông (787,604), and the Dao (620,538), all dwelling in the northern highlands. Together, these six groups form exactly 70 per cent of all highland minority populations in the country. The largest linguistic family represented in the north as well as in the rest of the country is the Thai-Kadai (Tày, Thái, Nùng, Sán Chay, Giây, Lự, Bố Y, La Chí, Cô Lao, La Ha, Pu Péo, plus the Lao) with 46 per cent of all national highland minority speakers, the Hmông-Dao coming second at 16.7 per cent. The provinces with the largest highland minority population are, in the north, Sơn La (728,431), Lạng Sơn (587,718), Thanh Hóa (568,996), Hòa Bình (546,861), Hà Giang (529,551), Lai Châu (488,488), Cao Bằng (467,379), and Lào Cai (397,475). In the south, these provinces are Đắc Lắc (524,541), Gia Lai (421,902), Lâm Đồng (212,629), and Kon Tum (168,535). Over the last twenty years the economic renovation has contributed to somewhat reducing the intensity of Communist state authoritarianism in the highlands. A generally more liberal attitude regarding trade, religion, education, and cultural expression has, however, failed to completely dissolve the government’s worries regarding highland security issues such as Christian agitation both in the north and the south, allegedly encouraged by outside agents. Yet, perhaps the most hotly debated issue regarding the highlands is environmental protection. The highland people of Vietnam are blamed by their government for the deforestation occurring in the uplands. In fact, the massive migration of Kinh from the plains, officially launched under the New Economic Zones scheme, put immense additional pressure on the natural resources of the upland ecosystems. Further, more or less spontaneous economic immigration unfolded at the end of the 1980s, and was soon encouraged, in the Central Highlands in particular, by crop substitution schemes and

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33 National Census of Vietnam, 1999, CD-ROM version. Since, Lai Châu has been divided into two distinct provinces. To harmonise with archival use and avoid unnecessary confusion, place names will generally be written in this repetition in conformity with what is found in the French colonial documents.
extensive plantations such as coffee aimed at enticing ever more farmers. This policy persists today, compounded with economic migration of minority peoples from the north to the south, in particular the Tày, Nùng, and Hmông. This excessive stress on resources has caused social tensions and triggered severe social unrest as well as a deterioration of the environment, most dramatically visible in the rapid deforestation, the lowering of ground water tables, and the increasing severity of annual flooding in the lowlands. In search of a sustainable solution, Vietnamese scholars are conducting research on issues such as customary law in relation to natural resource management, on indigenous knowledge and indigenous strategies for improved fallow management, and on community-based forest management institutions.

The renewed academic interest for the highland societies of upland Vietnam faces many challenges. One of the most discouraging ones is the scarcity of written material to work with when attempting to trace back the history of these societies or in assessing their past state when evaluating the pace and importance of social change occurring today. Undeniably, ethnological research has been conducted by Communist ethnologists during the 1954–1980s years. But as Evans sharply pointed out, this production was heavily tainted by a very pragmatic ideology inherited from the USSR and China, which perceived minority nationalities as a ‘problem’ standing in the way of the Socialist project, of national unity, and of modernisation. Still, the rare Western anthropologists allowed to keep in touch with Vietnamese ethnologists before the economic renovation, showed in their own publications that local ethnographies, with their imperfections, nevertheless constituted a unique body of valuable on-site observations, one that awaits translation into English.

In this context of a lack of availability or plain scarcity of ethnographical material on Vietnam’s highlanders, the French speaking cohort of anthropologists are at an advantage. During the nearly one hundred years that France was in a position to impact decisively on the course of Vietnam’s history (1858–1954), an impressive sum of documents was released. Perhaps it is concerning the minorities in the Central Highlands that the largest amount of written material has been produced, this advantage due to a relatively late blitz of ethnographical research done between 1954 and 1975 when Western ethnographers formerly working in the north had retreated south of the 17th parallel. This was clearly a troubled period when, for strategic reasons related to the West’s involvement in supporting the southern Republic of Vietnam’s
resistance against the northern Communist forces, large sums of money and logistical facilities were made available to perform anthropological research among the southern highland minorities.34

However, before 1954, it is arguably the uplands of the north that benefited most from the ethnographical research effort of colonial times. When the French unleashed their troops to take-over Cochinchina in the south of Imperial Vietnam in 1858, it was towards the north that their main concerns regarding border security were directed. The historical feud between Imperial China and Vietnam had long conferred a geo-strategic importance to the Marches north and east of the Red River delta, an importance surpassing that of the southern highland frontiers where former foes (the Cham, the Khmer, the Lao, and the Siamese) did not pose a serious threat. Thus, in the north, massive military ethnographical ventures were organised by the French in 1898 and 1903 on a scale that was never matched in the south, to study populations dwelling beyond the Red River delta. Missionaries, administrators and academics then did the rest.

Today, the paradox is that this ethnographical data from the north is left largely untouched, even ignored in the performance of anthropological research on populations in the upland north of Vietnam. Untouched, first, by the Vietnamese researchers for whom the knowledge of French language has been downgraded to a low priority. Untouched also by the international community of researchers in anthropology for whom mastering Vietnamese already constitutes a tall order, while accessing French colonial archives becomes an obstacle often considered hardly worth the effort. Even French archivists and researchers are not entirely aware of the data contained in these archives.

As a result, a number of scholars who conduct their research on highland societies in the north of Vietnam today can unknowingly go down paths that have already been explored by their colonial predecessors. If they could take into account the history embedded in ancient publications and archives, many of the hypotheses researchers base their investigations on could be better demonstrated, perhaps wholly verified, or simply contradicted. Obviously this predicament is very complex and cannot be easily resolved. As alluded to in Chapter 1, this book thus

becomes a contribution to helping researchers avoid such unnecessary repetitions and omissions by presenting in a concise form the most valuable among an important segment of those early ethnographical works performed during colonial times by some of its most ancient representatives, the Catholic missionaries. It also constitutes a glimpse into Western ethnology in the making.