

# Colonial rhetorics of modernity in Vietnam: “The New” (Cái mới) in Vietnamese literature during the colonial period

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## **Abstract:**

Much of colonial discourse relied polemically on the rhetoric of colonial modernity; meanwhile, behind the discursive and practical power of modernity is colonial exploitation. It asks how notions of the new novel, the new woman, and foreigners reflected and influenced Vietnamese intellectuals' imagination about the Vietnamese nation and Vietnamese literature. In other words, the concepts of new women, new literature, or foreigners, based on the historicist view of humans and literature, helped to mask colonialism in the discourse of modernity, making it appear desirable and reasonable. This article argues that the participation of theorists, writers, critics, and journalists in metropolitan countries and colonies in articulating modernity went beyond its attached colonialist purpose to think and act for the “real” development of Vietnam intellectually, economically, and politically. This was meant to construct a national culture. As such, this article engages with a deconstructing approach, emphasising the historically specific context of colonial dependence in colonial Vietnam.

**Keywords:** “Cái mới”, colonial modernity, new novel, new women, rhetorics of modernity.

**Classification numbers:** 9.2, 10

## **1. Introduction**

Behind the discursive and practical power of modernity is colonial exploitation. The other was transformed economically and culturally to serve industrial capitalism [1-3]. Colonies became centres of production for metropolitans and consumers of metropolitan goods [4, 5]. Colonialism, in the guise of the discursive essentiality of modernity, became the object of the colonised's desire: “They *desire* to follow us” (emphasis added). Becoming modern/new - taking Western economies, cultures, technologies, and politics as idealised developments - became the internal motivation of native actions, which helped to sustain colonialism, even until the postcolonial era. In the context of colonial Vietnam, some scholars addressed the similar tendency as “colonial modernity which is in contrast with “real” modernity for native

wealth”. Colonial modernity, sometimes also referred to “bourgeois trappings and “surface” modernity”, refers to the phenomenon of growing fetishisation of material wealth and individualism in new middle-class urban people that masked the exploiting nature of colonialism [6, 7].

As one can see, this article takes the perspective of the unity or the singularity of the influence of French colonialism on modernisation in the fields of production, science, and technology, and on the emergence of modernity in the culture of colonial Vietnam. Nevertheless, this article engages with a deconstructing approach, emphasising the historically specific context of colonial dependence in colonial Vietnam. It acknowledges the complexity and contradictions in the reception of Western modernism and modernity in colonial Vietnam that other scholars

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about colonial Vietnam have pointed out. They have narrated the story of the colonial encounter in Vietnam in a subtle way so that it looks neither nationalist nor colonialist. *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonisation* (1858-1954) by P. Brocheux, et al. (2009) [8] is one example. This research emphasises the “ambiguity” of the colonial experience, the complexity of the colonial encounter, and the diversity of the interactions between colonised and colonisers. C.E. Goscha (2004) [9] also aimed to understand the complex colonial modernity in Vietnam by studying the life and work of Nguyen Van Vinh (1882-1936), an influential Vietnamese intellectual. In this research, the Vietnamese intellectual is described as the one who strategically adopted French cultural and civilising achievements for his project to modernise Vietnam as much as the rest of the modern world. J.R. Merchant (2014) [10] argues that the complexity of power relations in colonial Vietnam arose particularly in the late period. During that time, both the French and the Vietnamese attempted to further their imperatives in cooperation and competition with each other. Merchant emphasised the agency of the Vietnamese in their way of using and shaping the colonial systems in manners that were not totally sanctioned by the French to transform their society.

My research shares such complex views of colonial history in Vietnam by way of delving into Vietnamese intellectuals’ visions of an idealised nation through their perceptions of “then-new” literature and “new” people. It is undeniable that the colonial program to modernise Indochina was not less than to transform Indochina into the centre of production and consumption of metropolitan goods, constructing France as “the premier people” [5]. In other words, the desire of Vietnamese intellectuals in their imagination of the modern Vietnamese nation was formed according to the colonial idea of modernity. Specifically, Vietnamese intellectuals’ vision of modernised Vietnam was shaped by the colonial program of civilising Indochina. Nevertheless, this article aims to assert that the Vietnamese intellectuals appreciated the cultural and material products that the French colonisation brought with it as possibilities for making Vietnam as modern as the West. As such, this article goes along with

Benedict Anderson’s statement about “the colonial experience that profoundly shaped nationalism” [11]. This article does not ignore anti-colonial sentiments in images of new literature and new people that are inspired by colonial literary and material models.

## 2. Methodology

This article applies a historically grounded, deconstructive textual analysis approach that examines how the rhetoric of colonial modernity operated across literary, journalistic, and ideological discourses in early twentieth-century Vietnam. The study analyses a wide corpus of materials, including Vietnamese periodicals (*Nam Phong*, *Phu Nu Tan Van*, *Phong Hoa*, *Ngay Nay*), literary and critical writings by Phan Boi Chau, Phan Khoi, Pham Quynh, Bui Quang Chieu, Nguyen Phan Long, Hoai Thanh - Hoai Chan. It also engages French discourses on the *mission civilisatrice* and *mise en valeur*. Through comparative reading across these materials, the article identifies the ambivalent, hybrid nature of “the new” (cái mới) in Vietnamese intellectual and cultural life under colonial rule.

## 3. Contents

### 3.1. New women

“Mise en Valeur”, a term that connoted economic developments pursued by capitalist imperial nations as well as the moral and cultural improvement to be shaped in colonies, arose from the French belief in the universal value of its civilisation [12]. The manifestation of the discourse of modernity in colonial Vietnam that helped to justify colonial modernity is not only the economic liberalism but also the cultural liberalism embodied in colonial constructions of the figure of new subjects such as new women, new novels, and foreigners in colonies in the early twentieth century. The participation of this figuration in colonialism is evident in its historicist base: The imaginary about native subjects follows Western measures of individualism, rationality, and social equality - terms used by colonisers to articulate their colonial exploitation. Noticeably, the elite Vietnamese helped to realise and maintain modernist concepts by discursively making the image of new women, new novels, and new foreigners desirable.

The notion of new women referring to female subjects who follow rationality and individualism [4, 13] joined the discriminatory discourse of Western cultural, economic, and political superiority and Eastern inferiority and backwardness. Progressive women are ones, as articulated, who embraced Western lifestyles, ideologies, and materials. In colonial Vietnam, the fabrication of the new women image by colonial scholars and elite natives was based on criticisms of existing habits, lifestyles, and ideas about Vietnamese women typified by backwardness and subordination by men. Bui Quang Chieu and Nguyen Phan Long, while imagining the national female, refer to the superiority of Western women in contrast to the supposedly low-educated Vietnamese women. Q.C. Bui (1929) points out how American and English women are more knowledgeable and have more self-esteem compared to Vietnamese women [14]. The image of an ideal woman, according to Bui Quang Chieu's point of view, is to learn Western values of freedom and equality while still maintaining traditional moral values. The imagination of national identity for women by Bui Quang Chieu seems to challenge the idealised image of traditional Vietnamese women that Pham Quynh was attempting to construct. Pham Quynh appreciated *The Tale of Kieu*, with the female character Thuy Kieu, who is obedient, quiet, miserable, and whose life is filled with melancholy. Supporting this trend, Pham Quynh, reinterprets traditional functions and Confucian morals, which foster the notion of obedience, passiveness to authorities, and fate as characteristics of Vietnamese [15]; and their intellectual and scientific inferiority. This identity is the "metaphysical dimension" created by the colonial French policy of the system of Francophone schools and presses to put down the desire for revolution and the discursive encouragements of individual freedoms in all life aspects [7, 16].

In such a context, Vietnamese intellectuals encouraged a new image of women who are modernised. They asserted that Vietnamese women must be completely emancipated from the feudal traditions of families and societies. Phan Boi Chau

defined "feminism" as women's equal participation in social activities [17]. In Phan Boi Chau's conception of women expressed in many works written in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the requirement that women can do anything is to emphasise women's ability to participate in social issues, specifically national revolution [17, 18]. Such anti-colonial, modern views of women challenged the oppressive doctrines of Confucianism concerning the family in which women were expected to obey fathers, husbands, and sons [19]. The prominent associations of French-educated nationalist intellectuals, including *Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tu Luc Van Doan)*, the periodicals *Cultural Renovation (Phong Hoa)*, *Today (Ngay Nay)*, and *New Letter Female (Phu Nu Tan Van)* in Saigon evoked the concept of new Vietnamese women. Led by the French-educated intellectual Phan Khoi (1887-1959) in 1924, *Phu Nu Tan Van* called for women's freedom in dressing, make-up, and social activities. There is a series of diaries called "Going to the West" (Sang Tay) published volumetrically in this journal in 1929. There were articles promoting the Western woman models in political sciences: The front page of each volume in 1929 had a long article named "We (Women) are discussing the politics" (Chung toi ban ve thoi su).

These authors joined the colonial discourse of modernity in the sense that it used the traditional/modernity framework - the Western linear point of view of societies - to discursively transform Vietnamese women's practices as the lower level on the ladder of female liberation. Western standards and goals - equal rights in all life aspects - are thereby used to evaluate the cultures and histories of non-Western females. Imagining Vietnamese women as victims of patriarchal society, the coloniser was motivated to set up colonial schools to teach women about their rights. This implied that native women could not develop without the support of colonial education. The French liberal feminist Clotilde Chivas-Baron, in the novel *Madame Hoa's Husbands*, nears its conclusion, let the protagonist declares her intent to use the Frenchman's financial resources to free her Vietnamese sisters from their bondage by establishing an education

system [20]. Here, French women are portrayed as the saviours and liberators of Annamese women. The passage echoes the colonial acceptance and silence towards the educational role of Western women. This also reflects the colonial administration's acceptance of the feminist movements pursued by international women [13].

Nevertheless, it was the Vietnamese intellectuals who realised the destructive aspect of modernity that the colonial system brought to its colony. Nguyen Phan Long, deputy leader of the Parti Constitutionnaliste Indochinois, denotes the social and moral danger of Vietnamese women, who are Westernised and leave their domestic position [13]. Nguyen Phan Long's criticism focuses on the way of becoming "new" through imitation without understanding and criticism. Such a way of depending on colonial modernity in articulating the concept of new women is more obvious in depictions of women who are not only those who had a Western education and embraced individualism, demanding all equal rights with men, but also ones whose "sexuality [is] expressed in individualistic ideas, behaviour, and modern forms of consumption" [4].

The other sign of the idealised new women is the new knowledge of hygiene and beauty. Such articulation made Vietnamese women slaves of Western products and technologies. Looking at advertisements in many volumes in 1929 of the *New Letter Female (Phu Nu Tan Van)*, there was the dominance of appealing news about French cosmetics and luxuries. The multi-function of the Paris beauty salon named *Keva* prevailed in each volume. It announced new branches of cleaning milk, lotions, spot-entry medicines, powders, and perfumes. Particularly, the female figure attached to the advertisement looked European: round and big eyes, immaculate white skin, transparent eyes, and fleshy lips and cheeks. This perfect figure was apparently for commercial purposes. Not only French cosmetics but also French wines were published in this journal. The common pattern of the advertisements of products is the emphasis on European origin and European style as the most guarantee of their saleability. For example, look at the post about raincoats of the shop

Tang Khanh Long in *Phu Nu Tan Van* (May 24, 1929): "New Arrival - Used in the Rain Season! Ladies and gentlemen, if you do not want a raincoat to keep your shirt clean and look beautiful in the rainy season, please come to my shop, Tang Khanh Long, to choose one: European style" (July 11, 1929). "European style" is the keyword supposed to attract buyers. However, as Henchy in her article "Vietnamese new women and the fashioning of modernity", women's concern for health and beauty are coopted with modernity's commodification and mystification: It is enslaved by the scientific modernity (pharmaceutical potions, medical theories, and technologies) accused of traditional belief and little scientific understanding [13, 22].

Furthermore, modern women/new women ultimately were consumers of Western products, which helped transform Vietnam into a centre of production and consumption as outlined by Albert Sarraut, the Radical deputy and a successful Governor-General of Indochina, the leader of the association theory. In the early 1900s, in France, when colonialist theorists rejected three existing colonialist theories, including domination, autonomy, and assimilation, the theory of association, which aimed at the progression of both the native and the French, took its turn in outlining French policies about Indochina. The use of the term *Mise en valeur*, which connotes the economic, cultural, and moral development of both the French and the natives, became popular in the defence of French colonialism [12]. However, in reality, as S.H. Robert (1963) [23] pointed out, "the standards of assimilation had lost their validity. Assimilation had denied the necessity of colonial individuality, and could not conceive of any justification for development away from a norm - the norm of Paris". "The image of colonial reality", said Sarraut, by 1920, "comes to adapt itself as a necessary complement to that of metropolitan existence" [23]. Colonies were made to become reservoirs of raw materials, emporia for home manufacturers, and the consummation centre of Western goods. The notion of new women that sequenced the growing consumption of European materials and ideologies articulated by elite natives matched the colonial policy of association.



### 3.2. New literature

In the nineteenth century, “language and national feeling became important factors in European nationalism”. Literature has its “own mission of advertising national commitment” [24]. In such a context, Vietnamese intellectuals must have searched for and fought for a so-called Vietnamese national literature representing Vietnamese identities. The concept of new literature in Vietnam must have carried the intellectuals’ vision of the national literature. The concept of new literature took French literature as the most progressive literature, denying discursively constructed constraints in contents and forms of native literatures. T. Hoai, et al. (2022) [25], explicitly appreciated Europeans, who brought the new poetry/literature to Vietnam, as the mother of once-motherless Vietnamese poets/writers: “Vietnamese youth presently is lonely and desperately looking for his poems like sons are looking for their mother” [25]. Hoai Thanh’s gratitude for the new poetry/literature, which was supposed to allow Vietnamese poets/writers to present their emotions freely, implies that it is the French who allowed and appreciated Vietnamese desires and dreams and that it was the French who made Vietnamese to be themselves” [25].

The articulation of the new prose by Hoai Thanh applies not only to Vietnamese poets but also to all literary writers. In the memory *Doi Cua Toi Ve Van Nghe* [My Literary Life] (1957), Ho Bieu Chanh proudly listed twelve novels that he wrote inspired by French novels. In the *Vietnam Literature Review*, volume 10, D. Hoang (2000) [26] appraises Nguyen Trong Quan and Ho Bieu Chanh - the two prominent novelists of Southern Vietnam as the first modern novelists who wrote first modern Vietnamese novels. This author argues that these novels present characteristics of modern novels in French. Similar to Hoang Dung, other scholars argue for Western influences on Ho Bieu Chanh’s novel in different aspects. T.M.L. Nguyen (2024) [27] recently published a thorough comparative study of Ho Bieu Chanh’s Vietnamese works with their French originals.

Prominent genres of postcolonial Vietnamese literature such as novels, short stories, and “new poetry” (non-“six-eight verse” and non-Chinese thematic poetry) - signs of modern literature - did not appear in Vietnam until the French colonial period [28]. French culture and literature that came to Vietnam along with the arrival of French colonialism transferred Vietnamese literature from the epic period to the novel period (Bakhtin) or from the period of “we” to the period of “I” [29, 30]. The latter became the target of Vietnamese literature, particularly since the time of Doi Moi [Renovation]. Or in the words of D.H. Tran (1996) [31], the revolution in New Poetry is associated with the process of liberating the individual ego from the constraints of human status, “functional human in a moral society”. The individual appearing in New Poetry is the person who exists as an ego carrying individual emotions, not as a duty or a social role as seen in medieval Vietnamese literature.

French education and newspapers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century brought into view of Vietnamese intellectuals modern literary genres. In Tonkin, *Nam Phong Newspaper* - the most wide-read newspaper - paid much attention to classical French writings that were being taught in French schools in Annam such as Corneille, La Fontaine, Moliere, Voltaire, Auguste, Paul Bourget, Baudelaire, Lamartine, Musset, Hugo, Balzac and Vigny [15, 32, 33]. In Cochinchina, *La Cloche Fêlée*, as far back as 1923, paid considerable attention to contemporary French intellectuals such as Jean Jaurès, Roman Rolland, and André Gide\* [32]. The introductions of these authors, who were representatives of the modern movement in European literature (romanticism and realism), brought Vietnamese writers to a new perspective of national literature, which departed from the classic literatures of the feudal time.

T. Son (1933) [34] talked about the development of realistic novels in Vietnam. He acknowledged the

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\*André Gide was mentioned in 1923 by Nguyen An Ninh. However, only in 1943 was the first Vietnamese translation of Gide’s *La Porte Étroite* issued. The first communication between the translator Pierre Do Dinh (Do Dinh Thach) and Pierre was in 1928.

influences of French literature in the emergence of this novel genre: “[Our novels] have been influenced by French literature, and perhaps it is thanks to that influence that they have evolved further”. He particularly called for the author’s brevity in writing about contemporary social problems to be different from classical medieval writers, who wrote about universal phenomena harmonising with their mental worlds. “Realist authors do not leave anything unmentioned. They are supposed to describe the “mental world and the material world”. They can write about what writers traditionally consider as “trivial and vulgar, not deserving to be mentioned in literature”. They are supposed to see the diverse world as materials for literature.

In the domain of poetry, the priority in composing poetry is the freedom to express the subjectivity of the authors, ignoring rules of poetic forms (that *ngon bat cu*, that *ngon tu tuyet*) that were once the regulation of feudal examinations of literature [35]. This poetic norm changed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the introduction of representatives of European romanticism, including Baudelaire, Lamartine, and Roman Rolland, in schools and newspapers in Vietnam [5]. On March 2, 1932, Phan Khoi, the chief editor of *Phu Nu Tan Van* [*New Letter Female*], officially accused the requirement of poetic forms of the feudal regime as the killer of poets’ poetic aspirations. Phan Khoi, at the same time, announced the birth of New Poetry, which allowed poets to demonstrate their emotions and thoughts freely without being constrained to any poetic forms [36].

The benefit that the discourse of new literature made for colonial modernism is the fact that new/modern authors are the strongest consumers of Western products. This is evident in Hoai Thanh, Hoai Chan’s description of the lifestyles of new/Western-educated intellectuals: “We are staying in Western houses; we are wearing Western hats, Western shoes, and Western shirts. We are using electric things, watches, cars, trains, bicycles, etc., and much more! How can we count sufficiently the material changes that Westerns brought to us?” [25]. The long list of Western items consumed by new intellectuals and the exclamation

sentence on the unaccountability of positive changes in material lives in Vietnam allegorises the victory of French colonial modernity in Vietnam.

As such, Vietnamese writers, while learning from Western literature, desire to compete with the dominance of foreign literature in Vietnam and to think about a literature that reflects the Vietnamese (Annam) identity.

### 3.3. Foreigners

The victory of colonial modernity is more obvious in the colonial notion of foreigners who are largely presented in the image of generous, smart, and reasonable whites/Europeans - desirable images for the future/modernity of Vietnam. This imaginary is concurrent with the discourse of white superiority - the common discourse that was used to justify the Western expansion over the remaining. C.E. Goscha (2004) [9] in the chapter “Mise en valeur: Building Indochina” of her book *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* (Oxford: Berg Publisher), reads the idealist image of railway engineers in the novel *La Kilometre 83* as the discourse supporting the colonial policy of building modern Indochina for the benefit of France. In addition to such a conception of foreigners as engineers of modern societies is the imagination of foreigners as masters of cultural and social aspects. The colonial novels such as *Kim* by Kipling and *A Passage to India* by Forster constructed images of whites as good friends and helpers of natives. In the latter, Fielding, a British officer, mobilised other British men and Indians to protest against the judge that is wrongly trying to imprison Aziz, the native Muslim. While Aziz’s attitude to Fielding is up and down, Fielding’s friendship with Aziz is quiet but durable. The love and hatred of Aziz is always extreme; Fielding is reasonable. The feeling of being sorry for Fielding for his failure to stay friends with Aziz when the novel closes shows Forster’s success in demonstrating the lovable image of white men in the colonies: They could function as keepers of social equality and justices for the colonies.

The use of foreign names for two progressive characters in two novels about Indochina in the early

20<sup>th</sup> century, Chivas-Baron's Ginette in *Madame Hoa's Husbands* and Harry Hervey's *Congai* (1927), demonstrates the power of foreign personality in the discourse of progress and modernity. *Congai* has two native female characters: One is named Thi Linh, and the other is named Nanette. Two mixed-race female characters in the novel *Madame Hoa's Husbands* are named Hoa and Ginette. While two females with Vietnamese names accepted the stigma discourse about congaies and Eurasians, the two others with French names were depicted as hardened, realistic, outspoken people who voiced critique about liberation and independence. Both of them become so-called rebels, refusing to be submissive and declaring their self-interest. Allegorically, the two novels show that only foreigners/French/Europeans are pioneers in revolutionary ideas and activities; without their guidance, the natives cannot progress, even if they cannot realise anti-colonial activities.

In the field of literary criticism, native critics appreciated their colonial scholars/teachers as guides in their thoughts and careers. Nguyen Van Hai, on the first page of his book about R. Tagore *Thi Hao Tagore - Nha Dai Bieu Van Hoa Phuong Dong*, stated that this book is in honour of "Prof. Nguyen Luong Khiet", who lent him many rare documents brought back from France. In the introduction, he expressed his gratitude to foreign teachers for motivating the love for Tagore among "us":

"We are mostly rationalists, so it is very difficult for us to master Tagore's ideologies. The reason why we could love Tagore - it is not a guarantee that we could comprehend him - is due to teachings by foreign teachers. Most of them are English and French. I am especially grateful for the Indian scholar Sushil Chandra Mitter, a professor of Ripon College in Calcutta, who explained [Tagore] to us. Now I want to bring what I learned [from these teachers] to my dear readers... Because Tagore has a lot of writings in Bengali... this book mostly uses translations by Prof. Mitter. The book editing Tagore's works, *La Pensée de Rabindranath Tagore* (Préface de Sylvain Lévi; Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1930), is the best resource for us as a base for writing this book" [28].

The passage so enthusiastically affirms the role of Western scholars as those who reformed the way of appreciating poetry in particularly and way of thinking in general of Vietnamese authors. Accordingly, to understand Tagore's poetry, the reader needs to use intuition and feeling rather than the knowledge of literary analysis or logical argument. Nguyen Van Hai quoted the French book as the origin of his newly published book as though it does not develop any new point. The Vietnamese scholar appears very proud to be just a follower of the scholar of French knowledge. The foreign names that fill the passage aim to impress and convince the reader of the French knowledge foreground of the book's contents. It is explicit that Vietnamese intellectuals like Nguyen Van Hai and Ho Bieu Chanh acknowledged the role of colonial scholars/intellectuals in helping them make sense of their world. Such acknowledgment must have been conformed to the contemporary rise of consumption of Western knowledge and material products for social mobility. The consumption of "all things Western" was seen as the marker of a civility or modernity level while also helping the Vietnamese intellectuals self-promote and aggrandise against their French peers in the colonial system [5, 11].

From the postcolonial critic's view, apparently vindicated the superiority of white knowledge and intelligence - the common discourse to justify European colonialism. However, from the postcolonial view proposed by E. Boehmer (2006) [37], we can see some anti-colonial mentality, either subtle or explicit, in the Vietnamese intellectuals' acknowledgment of the Western masters and models. Postcolonial criticism is an approach to literature, history, politics, and culture that focuses on the confrontation between the West and the non-West that is implicit in the discourses of these fields. Postcolonial criticism focuses on responses to colonial oppression. These responses can be explicit in the denial of and resistance to colonial power, or they can be subtle, secretive, devious, and hidden in their resistance [4]. In a way of excitingly learning Western models in lifestyle, and way of thinking or in general, intellectuality, Vietnamese writers must

have thought of a modern Vietnamese nation. That idealised Vietnamese nation is potentially comparable to the supposedly superior Western world, so colonial Vietnam was no longer the subject of the so-called civilising mission.

#### 4. Conclusions

In general, the concepts of new women, new literature, or foreigners, based on the historicist view of humans and literature, helped to mask colonialism in the discourse of modernity, thus making it desirable and reasonable [37]. Nevertheless, as presented, the Vietnamese theorists, writers, critics, and journalists in Vietnam did not pursue the colonial modernity as the passive consumer but evoke “a world of transgression and transition, becoming an icon of modernism’s complexities” [13]. Specifically, Vietnamese intellectuals went beyond its attached colonialist purposes to think and act for the “real” development of Vietnam intellectually, economically, and politically, which meant to construct a national culture. As such, this article engages with a deconstructing approach, emphasising the historically specific context of colonial dependence in colonial Vietnam.

#### COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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