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The Road Less Traveled
Automobiles in French Colonial Indochina

The twentieth century was a period when innovation and technology advanced at a rate never before seen in world history. One of the foundations of this revolution was the automobile. Arguably, the automobile was the fuel for this rapid development in that it was a major means of transporting ideas and people across land masses quickly and more cheaply. In the developed world the automobile has greatly benefited the life of nearly every person in some way. I agree with how British author Ruth Brandon reflected on her connection with the automobile symbolized this impact writing, "Without my car I could not live where I do, eat, shop, travel as I do, holiday where I do, perceive the world as I do."[1] Truly, the automobile has been an integral part of the lives of many people throughout the world. The unique circumstances surrounding Vietnam in the twentieth century allowed the automobile to take on a different status than is to be expected for such an invention.

While the automobile made a distinctive mark in the world during the twentieth century, this mark was not as profitable as perhaps its connection to Southern California freeways or to Germany with its autobahns, for example. The manner in which the automobile influences culture is quite varied. While many positive results have resulted from the introduction of the automobile to Vietnam, the net effect of the automobile there has been an ill-fated failure. The perspective that automobiles greatly provide a means of increased productivity has failed in Vietnam not because it has not been tried, but because the variables surrounding the automobiles have not allowed it to become a success. It follows that the lack of success with automobiles does not allow for Vietnam to reap the full benefits the automobile brings. This success or

[1] Ruth Brandon, *Auto Mobile* (London: Macmillan, 2002), 5.

productivity includes not just financial progress, but intellectual progress as a result of people in closer communication and a social progress as people are exposed to other countrymen outside their villages.

To the extent that the automobile has succeeded in Vietnam, it has failed the culture miserably. This is to say that from the perception of many colonial Vietnamese the automobile brought nothing of value to the general populace, but rather created more conflict. Indications pointing to this conclusion include conflicts arising from race and class, the expense of roads, and misunderstandings between pedestrians and cyclists over road use.

With the long span automobile history covers, it is difficult to isolate trends when time is such a factor of change. This paper will primarily be concerned with the automobile in the context of French Indochina as opposed to modern Vietnam for two reasons. Firstly, if any period could be considered a golden age for the automobile in Vietnam, it would have to be its years under French colonial rule which coincided with the growth of automobile use. Automobiles were not readily sold on the mass market in the western world until the 1890's by, oddly enough, French car manufacturer Peugeot and other less influential companies.[2] The majority of Indochina had been conquered before the fall of Hanoi some twenty years prior to the creation of an automobile market.

The periods after French rule should not be considered as the golden age of the automobile either. The continuous warfare had rendered many of the national and provincial roads impassable. The system of highways was destroyed and rebuilt twice during the Indochinese War, then overhauled during the Franco-Viet Minh War, and overhauled once again with American aid in 1968. Overhauls were necessary due to the constant bombardment not only from military forces, but from natural forces such as tidal floods. With the war at hand,

[2] *The History of the Automobile*. http://inventors.about.com/library/weekly/aacarsassemblya.htm, 2 May 2003.

men and resources were not available to make repairs that were constantly needed on the roads. For example, despite all of these overhauls, South Vietnamese roads were still impassable due to random attacks by the Viet Cong. The roads would be open for awhile, until dangerous conditions left the roads useless for long periods of time.[3] Even after the wars, Vietnam was in no financial condition to afford food let alone import massive numbers of automobiles.[4] For many families the necessity to survive meant that any material goods smuggled or sent from relatives abroad would have to be sold. For the reasons of war after 1945 and consequently extreme poverty, colonial Indochina is the nearest to the golden age for automobiles by default.

The second reason colonial Indochina is a prime period for studying is the fact that it coincided with the time frame for which the automobile was introduced and popularized. By popularized, I mean accepted to a degree that it was not a rarity.[5] Part of the objective of this paper is to show that the automobile was not immersed into the Vietnamese culture, but at the same time there was, nonetheless, a healthy automobile presence. Analyzing this particular time frame gives the opportunity to view the situation from the beginning. Understanding the initial and the early automobile situation allows us to see how the automobile has developed in post-French and modern Vietnam.

Before discussing the failure of the automobile, a foundation must be laid regarding the actual presence of the automobile. Every potential factor needed to make the automobile a success was, indeed, in place during French colonization. A necessary component to any automobile development is the existence of good roads. In 1912, Governor-General Albert

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[3] *Mounting Security Opens Anew Highways to Civilian Traffic*, Vietnam Magazine, vol. 3, no. 11 (The Vietnam Council on Foreign Relations, 1970), pp. 4-6.
[4] Peter T. White, *Hanoi, the Capital Today*, National Geographic, November 1989, p. 571. Regarding Hanoi in 1988, Peter White wrote, "Nearly everyone is on the state payroll, but the monthly salaries are so low that one can live on them only a couple of weeks".
[5] Appendix D.

Sarraut initiated an ambitious program to build a system of highways.[6] By at least the mid 1920s this highway system had became a superb example of modern transportation. With the exceptions of possibly the American-held Philippines or British Malaya, French Indochina had the finest system of roads in the Far-East. This is no small feat, considering the fact that this included China and Japan. This fact has been well documented from different well-traveled American and French sources.[7] Included in this system were twenty-two eventual colonial highways maintained by the French colonial government and a series of locally and provincially maintained roads. For the most part, the early roads were made from what the French call *empierrée* or what is translated into English as cobblestone. Any remaining stretches of highway were left as unpaved dirt roads, which proved a problem during the flooding season. Roughly a third of these dirt roads were rendered useless during at least half of the year due to bridges being destroyed, roads submerged with water, and other flooding related problems[8]. By the mid-forties, much of the highway system had been improved to asphalt[9]. The conversion to asphalt diminished, but by no means extinguished the problems with flood waters.

The backbone for the entire highway infrastructure of Indochina was Colonial Route One or better known as the Mandarin Road. The very mention of the Mandarin Road evoked a romantic notion of the riches and splendor of the Orient. This road started at the northern

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[6] W.D. Styer, *French Indochina: Section 11 & 12 Transportation*, Civil Affairs Handbook M359-8, (Washington DC: Headquarters Army Service Forces, 1944), p. 26.
[7] Ibid; U.S. Department of State, Saigon Consulate, *Tour of Inspection to Bac Lieu Cochinchina*, by LL Smith, Correspondence to a superior, Department Instruction No. 623, Microfilm: 0025 (560 150), pg 2; U.S. Department of Commerce, *Automotive Markets in China, British Malaya, and Chosen*, by William I. Irvine, (Washington DC: Washington Government Printing Office, 1923), p. 74; Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indochina*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 99.

[8] Roland Dorgelès, *On the Mandarin Road*, (New York: The Century Co., 1926), p. 13; Also see "Indochinese Road Development: Lengths of Colonial Roads by Year " in Appendix A which compiles statistics from several volumes of: Statistique Générale, *Moyens de Transport et de Communication* (Averages of Transportation and Communication), Annuaire Statisique de L'Indochine (Annual Statistics of Indochina), (Hanoi: Imprimerie D'Extréme-Orient,)
[9] W.D. Styer, p.26.

Chinese boarder, through Hanoi, down the coast, past Saigon, and then at some point branched off to Siam or today what is known as Thailand. Much to the disappointment of French traveler Roland Dorgelès, the Mandarin Road was nothing more than, "a wide, badly paved highway, skirting the railroad."[10] His statement is very true while at the same very misleading. As his account of the Mandarin Road progresses, his understanding of the road becomes fuller. Farther down the road, Dorgelès corrects his previous statement by saying, "the Mandarin Road…has as many aspects as the journey has days."[11] By this Dorgelès means to say that the road is as varied as it is long. There would be stretches where the road would be overtaken by a rice patty, and yet other stretches where it was wide and accommodating. These flaws were by far exaggerated as all but fifty of over sixteen hundred miles were passable most of the year around the time of Dorgelès' visit.[12] The previous statistic indicates that this was a phenomenal road considering the climate and length to maintain. The Mandarin Road was very functional, but to Dorgelès' dismay was by no means paved with gold.

From the main highway branched the rest of the other twenty-one colonial highways. Hanoi and Saigon served as hubs for the concentration of highways in their respective location. Few federal highways ventured off into the mountains, but mainly stuck to Highways One near the coast. To a great degree it was still possible to travel to any significant city in Indochina by automobile during the dry season. An experienced driver could make most trips during the flood season as well with the assistance of ferries and plenty of time. Route seven even ventured from Tonkin into the mountains to connect with Vientiane in Laos.[13] While most cities were

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[10] Roland Dorgelès, p. 7.
[11] Ibid. p. 29.
[12] Statistique Générale, *Moyens de Transport et de Communication* (Averages of Transportation and Communication), Annuaire Statisique de L'Indochine: 1923-26 (Annual Statistics of Indochina), (Hanoi: Imprimerie D'Extréme-Orient, 1927), p.130.
[13] Robequian, p. 102

connected by a colonial highway, problems arose when that highway was impassible. Obstacles often meant travelers must either return home to wait out the problem, take an alternate route via another city, or secure another means of transportation. Author Duong Van Mai Elliot remembered taking a trip from Hanoi to Haiphong that lasted all day despite a distance of only seventy-five miles. The problem was that the railroad was out of commission and only one highway was in service between the two bustling cities.[14] At times, the railroad paralleled the highways so if conditions crippled the road it would be impossible to travel by train or automobile[15]. As time progressed, the adoption of asphalted roads did create a system of roads that was near all-weather.

The cities themselves had developed sophisticated road systems. Roland Dorgelès noted that the Mandarin Road "straightened out to pass through towns," indicating the nicest portions of highways were those that passed through the towns.[16] It is not surprising that cosmopolitan Saigon had large modern avenues like those found in Europe. The heavily Chinese populated Cholon was also noted to have had good motor roads due to its prosperity.[17] Cochinchina had by far the best system of roads in Indochina with most of the burden carried by the provincial government. Only ten percent of the roads in Cochinchina were maintained by the colonial government with the rest under local control. Compare this to Annam, Cambodia, and Laos which maintained only fifty percent of their roads and Tonkin which maintained eighty. In addition, Cochinchina had more road length than any of the other provinces.[18] Hanoi also adopted a French style system of roads with its tree lined boulevards that remain today full of

[14] Duong Van Mai Elliot, *The Sacred Willow*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 190.
[15] Robequian, p. 99
[16] Roland Dorgelès, p.29.
[17] Jane A. Randall, *Guidebook to the Ports of Asia*, (Manila: Philippine Education Co., 1926), p.164.
[18] Appendix C

bicyclists[19]. Cambodia's capital Phnom-Penh also had a complete set of automobile friendly roads, though not as inviting as bustling Saigon.[20]

With an extensive system of roads covering most of the country, Indochina was then able to accommodate automobiles. Initially, automobiles were a rarity left for foreigners living in the big cities. This was the case for the entire Asian continent. Therefore, the places which first took hold of the automobile were places where foreigners were most prevalent.[21] This would include the places where French and Chinese citizens immigrated and visited along with a few American, British and Italian expatriates and tourists. Higher concentrations of immigrants and tourists could be found in Saigon, Cholon, Hanoi, and to a lesser extent Phnom-Penh. Westerners would likely already be familiar with the automobile before coming to Indochina and would often bring their own over from their country of origin[22]. For a long time automobiles would be in the hands of only recent immigrants, the extremely wealthy or powerful, and a very few business operators. It was not until the later in the French period that automobiles became prevalent. Until the twenties not even wealthy plantation owners could afford their own automobile. They had to travel by bike or small cart to the nearest big city to catch the train.[23]

By 1922, the automobile had begun to take hold as over four thousand autos were accounted for. That number grew exponentially as over twenty-two thousand were recorded just seven years later in 1929. More than half of these vehicles could be found in Cochinchina of which half were in Saigon-Cholon[24]. Peugeot had dealerships in both Saigon and Phnom-Penh,

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[19] Peter T. White, p.570.
[20] Sidney J. Legendre, *Land of the White Parasol*, (Binghamton NY: Vail-Ballou Press Inc., 1936)
[21] William I. Irvine, p. 4.
[22] This fact that automobiles were shipped over is based on information from a movie based on a true account : Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*, (MGM, 1992)

[23] Robequain, p. 203.
[24] [24] Statistique Générale, *Moyens de Transport et de Communication* (Averages of Transportation and Communication), 1936-37, p. 115.

and competed for market share with other French brands such as Renault and Citroen.[25] Saigon was really the automobile center of Indochina complete with several garages, auto insurance dealers, vacation car rentals, and tire shops. Saigon was also home to the Société des Transports et Automobiles de I'Indochine or The Society of Transport and Automobiles.[26] The S.T.A.I had member garages up and down the Mandarin Road and one in Phnom-Penh. S.T.A.I even sponsored an auto race at one time called the Grand Rallye des Hauts Plateaux.[27] Ford was the major American entrant into the Indochinese market as indicated from garage advertisements proclaiming that they fixed Ford Cars.[28] It is certain that Ford and the other American companies shipped cars to British Malaya and China from Ford's Canada division.[29] It would seem reasonable that Ford Canada would also ship to Vietnam. Other American companies were rarely found in Indochina, but there is evidence that Plymouth[30] and Lincoln[31] had a slight presence.

Following the legacy entrenched in the colonial way of doing things, Indochina lacked manufacturing capabilities and subsequently had to import nearly all machinery. Despite British influence in Malaya and China, the preferred vehicles of choice in those respective nations were

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[25] Peugeot Advertisement, *Bulletin du tourisme Indochinois* (Bulletin of Indochinese Tourism), November-December 1937.
[26] Claudie Beaucarnot, *Adieu Saigon, Au Revoir Hanoi: The 1943 Vacation Diary of Claudie Beaucarnot*, (David Del Testa, 2002), p.14.
[27] Société des Transports et Automobiles de I'Indochine, *Grand Rallye des Hauts Plateaux* (pamphlet), (1954), p.p. 22,32,34,40,41.
[28] Ibid.
[29] William I. Irvine, p.73
[30] Peter T. White and David Alan Harvey, *Saigon: Fourteen Years After*, National Geographic, November 1989, p. 607. This picture shows a well cared-for antique Plymouth in modern Vietnam much like what can be found in Cuba.
[31] Jean Jacques Maitam, interview by Dr. David Del Testa, live interview, California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks CA, 9 December 2002; Jean Jacques Maitam, *A House Divided*, (Greensboro NC: Tudor Publishers, 1999). In both the interview and the book, Mr. Maitam indicates his father and Emperor Bao Dai were the only two men in all of Indochina to own Lincolns. Mr. Maitam recalls that his father's twelve cylinder black Zephyr seated eight, yet was not large enough to accommodate all of the family.

American.[32] From the onset it appears that American automobile manufacturers had a considerable advantage in Asian markets due to the lower price achieved through the innovation of the assembly line. However, it is likely that American influence was in no way as strong in Indochina as in the rest of Asia. In his booklet, Automotive Markets in China, British Malaya, and Chosen, author William Irvine claims that the European auto makers maintained hold of the high priced vehicle market due to "special efforts" to do so, and that this is a "situation that holds true in practically all the strictly Far Eastern markets".[33] Given that point and that the duties placed upon manufactured objects of foreign origin were extremely high, it is very improbable that any automobiles made outside France were abundant.[34] If a person perceived a Citroen to be of better quality and after added customs it equaled the price of a Ford, it would be obvious as to which brand the consumer would choose. One Peugeot advertisement depicting a car full of stylish white women even claims that "all the roads in Indochina are cover with Peugeot cars."[35] I would compare colonial Vietnam to modern Singapore where cars are not common, but those people who could afford cars usually would rather pay slightly more for a luxury car than a common car when tariffs are high.

Demographically it is interesting how car ownership breaks down in Indochina. According to both Robequain and the Annual Statistics of Indochina over half of individually owned cars belonged to native Indo-Chinese with about 6,800.[36] With a native population of over twenty-three million, the percentage of privately owned cars was relatively miniscule. Overall, the European population of Indochina in 1937 was around 42,300 and not even close to

[32] William I. Irvine, p.4. In this stating 65% of Chinese cars were American in 1920.
[33] Ibid, p.5
[34] Robequain, p. 322
[35] Peugeot Advertisement, *Bulletin du tourisme Indochinois* (Bulletin of Indochinese Tourism), November-December 1937. Literally: "Toutes les routes de l'Indochine sont sillonnees par les voitures Peugeot."

[36] [36] Statistique Générale, *Moyens de Transport et de Communication* (Averages of Transportation and Communication), 1936-37, p. 115

one percent of the total population.[37] However, using the Annual Statistics from 1937 nearly 15% of the population owned an automobile, which would probably indicate nearly every French blooded family owned one. In addition to privately held automobiles, there were a substantial number owned by the state (both French colonial and imperial), by small business (*sociétés anonymes*), and by dealers. Nevertheless, in 1936 it is evident that the automobile was still rare enough to where many ethnic Vietnamese still had never witnessed one.[38]

For most Indochinese, the automobile held an entirely different role altogether from modern western culture. Today, the automobile has become a necessity that one cannot live without to function as a social human being. People now commute to work, and there are no longer corner grocery stores within walking distance in most places. The automobile for the Indochinese was a luxury item that did not hold much practical value. Automobiles were bought as "pleasure cars" to tour the countryside. This supports the idea that luxury cars with all the amenities of comfort were popular including limousines.[39] In nearly every automobile advertisement I have seen from Indochina, the words "comfortable" or "suspension" appears prominently.[40] The name given to cars in the French (voitures de tourisme) indicates the connotation of touring or relaxing. The French have stereotypically been linked with the notion of vacation, so the introduction of the automobile conformed to the social constraints of the culture. If people are going on a long drive touring they naturally want comfort. Exotic Indochina was a popular destination for adventure seekers worldwide. This previous concept gave rise to the automobile as a means to explore Vietnam in a way less rigid than a set train line

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[37] Robequain, p.21
[38] Sidney J. Legendre, *Land of the White Parasol*, (Binghampton NY: Vail-Balbu Press Inc., 1936), p. 21
[39] Peugeot Advertisement, *Bulletin du tourisme Indochinois* (Bulletin of Indochinese Tourism), (Saigon: Bureau Officail du Tourisme Indochinois) January-February 1938.
[40] Peugeot Advertisement, *Bulletin du tourisme Indochinois* (Bulletin of Indochinese Tourism), (Saigon: Bureau Officail du Tourisme Indochinois November-December 1937. and Société des Transports et Automobiles de I'Indochine, *Grand Rallye des Hauts Plateaux* (pamphlet), (1954), p.40. The latter ad. Features a Land Rover going off road past a sign saying "dangerous road"

or a caravan of porters. Another aspect to this thrill-seeking mentality was the selling feature of speed. One touring business advertises in the Grand Rallye brochure that their service offers cars with "speed" written in all capitalized letters.[41] As a luxury item, thrill seekers including Emperor Bao Dai bought automobiles for their performance capabilities. Those with the ability and desire to buy automobiles did so primarily for the functions of entertainment and diversion.

Not until later in the colonial period was the automobile realized as a major means of practical applications. The General Government of Indochina began recording the number of automobiles in 1922, but not until the statistics of 1929 did the categories of buses, tractors and trucks appear. The expense associated with the early automobile created a barrier to being commonplace. As Robequain keenly observed, when already depreciated second-hand automobiles cycled to Vietnamese entrepreneurs was the start of general populace benefiting from the automobile.[42] Every ounce of life was coaxed out the "common carrier", as it was repaired to live another day to carry loads of crammed customers along specific routes. The development of traditional carrier service with taxis seemed to be a service industry advanced by native Vietnamese. One traveler, who published his book in 1927, reported that Vietnamese taxicab drivers were usually lined up around the Saigon opera house.[43] What must be mentioned is that transportation fares of any kind of automobile were very expensive with one travel guide quoting a private vehicle rental at $120 USD from Saigon to Phnom Penh. Bus fare was not much better with round trip fare almost $30 USD a person in 1926.[44] It is safe to assume the presence of the automobile in French Indochina, though to a certain degree available to average

[41] Société des Transports et Automobiles de I'Indochine, p.34
[42] Robequain, p.105
[43] Harry Hervey, *King Cobra*, (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Company), 1927.
[44] Jane Randall, p.165

people via dilapidated common carriers, was limited to tourists, wealthy merchants, and French settlers.

Now that the state of the automobile has been established, we must circle back to the original discussion as to how the circumstances of its introduction were detrimental to the culture. Automobiles in themselves as objects cannot be detrimental to any culture, but the perception from various variables surrounding automobiles may bring can be very negative. Understandably, historical sources do not focus on openly deriding automobiles, but a reoccurring theme surrounding events where automobiles are present or relevant indicate strong negative connotations.

Under the rule of a foreign power the people of Indochina were pushed to determine who they were, what side they would take, and who they would identify with. Lines were drawn across families and villages because of ideological differences. Indochina became a colony of great division especially in terms of race, class, wealth, and notably ideology. Expert David G. Marr explores this era of complex social thinking in his book Vietnamese Tradition on Trial.[45] Marr's insights are applicable to the negative perception of automobile on many different levels at least from the perspective of the educated class. To begin with, a remnant of the old Mandarin class would exist for the duration of the colonial period. Marr points out that until the 1920's traditional scholarly thought saw anything outside of Confucian East Asian understanding as barbaric.[46] This generation of thinking would see little difference between the ways of the industrialized French and those of the simple tribes living in the mountains of Indochina. Practically, an automobile would seem an inferior mode of transportation to a rickshaw based on the principle that it is not proper for a cultured person to use. The sense of propriety was based

[45] David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial: 1920-1945*, (Berkley: University of California Press), 1981.
[46]Ibid, p.9

not on what was most superior usefully, but upon what was superior culturally. Cultural superiority meant namely "the way it has always been done", and automobiles were certainly not part of the way it had always been done in Vietnam. Widespread adoption of the automobile in Indochina would fail the culture in this sense of Neo-Confucian thought as a perceived moral decay.

After a generation passed to where the intellectual community had been educated in French classrooms, the "West-versus-East paradigm" disintegrated with the realization that "Eastern spirit" could not be superior when Indochina was subjugated to a Western power.[47] Marr continues, "In place of idealized philosophical and cultural systems, Vietnamese writers moved increasingly to historical process as a central explanation of reality." The reality that still remained was French control over Indochina, and the disparity of automobile ownership was an obvious point of difference between the French and native Vietnamese. The concept of the automobile as a symbol of Western inferiority went away, but the negative perception remained from an entirely different standpoint. Full of nationalism, those Vietnamese valuing independence held contempt not for the automobile in itself, but for arrogant French automobile owners. The automobile became an everyday symbol of cultural imperialism that existed in French Indochina. In his autobiographical work from a rubber plantation, communist revolutionary Tran Tu Binh describes automobiles as if they were oppressive agents in cohorts with the French. To begin his servitude, Mr. Tran was crammed with 150 others on a "bone-jarring, soul-shattering two-day truck ride."[48] At this point, his perception of the automobile would be similar to an African slave's perception of the slave ship. The truck's use comes to personify French maltreatment in the mind of Tran and his abused compatriots. Since the truck

[47]Ibid, p.10
[48] Tran Tu Binh, *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation*, (Athens Ohio: Ohio University for International Studies), 1985, Translated by John Spragens Jr., Edited by David G. Marr, p.23.

was used as a means of abuse, it becomes hated as much as the "master" behind the tool. Recalling his contact with Frenchman, Mr. Tran regularly evokes automobiles to paint a picture of greed, inequality, haughtiness, and arrogance. Immediately, the fact that the plantation manager owned several cars is conveyed when he is introduced in the narrative. When the manager had, "[one car] to use around the plantation, another to go off on trips, yet another for the family when they went out on pleasure drives," it made an impact in terms of the paucity of largess and benevolence on the part of French settlers.[49] Resentment was reinforced as some workers were assigned to work in the plantation auto garage "reserved for the use of the manager and the French overseers."[50] A reoccurring theme is French automobile ownership facilitated by the sweat of the indentured native population. Specifically, workers in the garage toiled to repair the plantation automobile fleet in inhumane conditions. On a broader scale, the Michelin Company owned and set the code of conduct for the Phu Rieng rubber plantation including the harsh beatings toward workers.[51] Michelin is known worldwide as the primer tire maker in the world, and the rubber garnered from the trees on the plantation was an integral product to those tires. The Indochinese rubber plantations exploited their workers to provide cheaper prices for French consumers and profits for French companies. Michelin's Phu Rieng "employees" certainly resented their French "employer", but also the French product they made at their own expense. For these rubber tree workers the automobile and tire industry were daily reminders of French exploitation and control of Vietnamese sovereignty. Naturally, based on the French connotation associated with these automobiles, it is reasonable to say that the automobile brought more bad than good to the Vietnamese in colonial Indochina.

[49] Ibid, p.24.
[50] Ibid, p.30.
[51] Ibid, pp. 33-4

What complicates this statement is the simultaneous social movement in Vietnam against capitalism and the bourgeois class altogether. The reality was that generally the circles of French and relatively wealthy coincided. Certainly a great deal of resentment was directed toward the French since colonialization, but it is difficult to isolate what resentment the Vietnamese felt toward wealth with two variables in play. If there was any indicator at all for wealth in colonial Indochina it would be the automobile. Looking back at the statistics of automobile ownership makes a clear statement of wealth breakdown in Indochina. Statistics of around 15% of French individuals owning automobiles contrasts greatly to the 6,800 automobiles among 23 million Vietnamese.[52] Conveniently, the perspective from the travel diary of Claudie Beaucarnot helps hedge the race factor, while allowing the reader to independently see the role class played in Indochina.

Born in Indochina, Miss Beaucarnot was a métisse, or a person of mixed racial heritage of both Vietnamese and French. The fact that she associated freely among races in a supra-colonial identity allows us to view an Indochinese source from a perspective not tainted by racial resentment. Nevertheless, the diary repeatedly defaults into an "us and them" mentality with regards to confrontation with pedestrian peasants. Besides providing a means of travel within Vietnam, the Beaucarnot family vehicle was a machine devoted to creating class conflict. This statement is by no means an exaggeration, but a statement of fact that is reaffirmed at least four times just in the Beaucarnot diary.

From the very first day accounted in the diary leaving the Red River Delta the reader immediately is made aware there is a conflict between pedestrian and driver. Miss Beaucarnot declares, "…the heat stupefies the Vietnamese pedestrians. We are obliged to honk many times

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[52] [52] Statistique Générale, *Moyens de Transport et de Communication* (Averages of Transportation and Communication), 1936-37, p. 115

before they take heed, never knowing if they will go to the right or the left"[53]. The Beaucarnots' perspective is that the roads were constructed to accommodate drivers, and pedestrians must work around traffic. Should the pedestrians not move, automobiles were equipped with a horn to obnoxiously announce that an automobile was present, and that those who were graciously permitted use needed to make way for the rightful possessor of the road. The "move it or lose it" philosophy keys us in into the mentality of the privileged as not having any concern for those outside their sphere. After honking, Mr. Beaucarnot dramatically hits a man after slamming on the brakes. His response is not fear for having nearly killed the man, but rather fury. Ms. Beuacarnot conveys that, "When Papa sees him unscathed, by reaction; he wants to administer a thrashing." Although Mr. Beaucarnot did the hitting, he blames the pedestrian for being in the road, slowing him down, and breaking the windshield. These examples from the Beaucarnot Diary strongly support the first part of my thesis as to why it would be logical that the automobiles had a detrimental effect or at least a perceived effect to the Vietnamese people. Still, there remains one final incident that perfectly exemplifies my assertion. In the Thanh Hoa province the Beaucarnot family decides to stop for awhile to add water to the radiator and buy some drinks. When they return to the car they find the right headlight destroyed and the hood smashed in. Claudie explains that she believes it was caused by "the boy that we had jostled a few minutes ago". Her nonchalant tone does not give justice to the fact that they had just about hit another pedestrian. Clearly, what has happened is the disgruntled pedestrian took revenge on the Beaucarnot family car for nearly being killed by the rude motorists. The car did nothing to hurt the man, but interestingly he secretly takes his anger out on the car instead of the people

[53] Claudie Beaucarnot, p.11.

themselves. I think what this man felt and did was not isolated, but was probably something a lot of Vietnamese felt like doing.

This is a scene all too often recalled in European narratives of Indochina. Del Testa asserts that pedestrian-driver conflicts are a "constant trope" throughout colonial-era literature.[54] Unlike the automobile, the bicycle came to be huge success in Vietnam even from the onset. Bicyclists encountered the same trouble as pedestrians sharing the roads with car owners. There is a column in The Indochinese Tourism Journal by a French woman who addresses the problem of bike versus auto traffic.[55] She advocated keeping traffic and cyclists separated and have government studies done regarding the problem. Obviously this situation had become serious enough to merit fervent debate.

The final way in which the automobile caused strain came from the expense of maintaining and expanding the system of roads. As has been stated previously the nature of the Vietnamese weather system and tropical climate do not cater to roads. Therefore, constant attention has to be paid to just maintain the system. Referring to roads in Laos, Robequain mentions, "[the] wooden bridges must be rebuilt after every rainy season, with a resulting large increase in taxation.[56]. Under the department of Public Works nine million piasters were spent in 1932 and over thirty-one million in 1941. With the piaster pegged 1 to 10 French francs after World War I, the spending totals amounted to 3.5 million and 6.2 million USD respectively.[57] Naturally, increased spending means revenue must increase proportionally. A gasoline

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[54] Ibid, p.11
[55] Bulletin Du Tourisme Indochinois. Sept-Oct. 1938. p. 5
[56] Robequian, 102
[57] This is a conversion very difficult to estimate. It is true the piaster was pegged to the franc, and 1931's totals are accurate based on the New York Exchange rate of one franc rounded equal to four cents and the pegged rate. Wall Street Journal (New York). 7 June 1932. p. 4. What is harder to figure is a conversion for 1941 because Europe was in war and the Franc was not being traded in New York. I would imagine the franc was worthless. According to one source one franc equaled two cents in 1945. I am using this conversion rate arbitrarily as a war-time standard rate for lack of official information. My source for this is Sol R. Brandell. *Recollections of a World War II Infantryman*. 89th Infantry Division of WWII. www.89infdivww2.org/memories/brandell_22.

consumption tax did exist to tax automobile owners who used the roads most.[58] However, an unfair burden of tax in was placed on the shoulders of the Vietnamese working class. The system in place for Vietnamese permitted local mandarins to collect taxes as officials of the treasury. Not only would the Vietnamese be required to pay their tax, but the mandarin would *squeeze* the peasants and pocket the extra money. Meanwhile, Europeans paid a standard income tax without the *squeeze* or paid no tax at all. It was written in one source, "In the eyes of [colonial] Europeans, the main appendage of [their newfound] nobility rests on tax exemption. Let us be careful. It is not for colonists…to revive the privileges which ceased to exist in France after the night of August 4, 1789".[59] From the perspective of the Vietnamese peasant, the automobile received another strike against it. Outrageously, the peasant class toiled to survive, but still had to pay high taxes to a government that used a substantial amount of money for infrastructural projects primarily used by the wealthy. The average Vietnamese person did not move far away, take summer vacations or pleasure drives, but lived his complete life in the land of his ancestors. The automobile failed the Vietnamese people again in the sense that the roads created to facilitate its use were financed to a great degree by a class of people not willing or able to use them. The issue of Virginia Thompson says, "The Annamite (Vietnamese) leaves his natal village, but to return."[60] The automobile was not just a visible symbol of economic and racial disparity but also of the wealthy benefiting at the expense of the poor.

Based on these findings it is quite reasonable to see that the automobile did in fact negatively affect the Vietnamese culture. Although other factors like geography, poverty, and the lack of a local auto industry all have contributed have to the lack of widespread adoption, it

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[58] Robequain, 155
[59] A. Messimy. *Notre Aeuvre Colonial*. (Paris, 1910). in *French Policy and Developments in Indochina* by Thomas E. Ennis (New York: Russell and Russell, 1936), 64,65.
[60] Virginia Thomson. *French Indo-China*. (London: George Allen Unwin), 459.

cannot be overlooked that perhaps the automobile is not accepted because of the way it divided people. In colonial Indochina the automobile was a wedge dividing people between classes and races. Again and again we see conflicts where cars are involved between motorists, pedestrians, and bicyclists. Finally, the fact that the expensive highways were recipients of tax dollars that benefited the elite of society rather than the whole was another example of a perceived negative aspect. It is assured that in some form automobiles will always remain in Vietnam, but to gain widespread approval the automobile must overcome the stigmas it acquired during the colonial era.

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Appendix A
Indochinese Road Development

Length of Colonial Routes by Year

In Kilometers

Year	Total Length	Auto useable	Coblestone	Asphalt	Dirt Roads (auto usable)	Dirt roads (not auto usable)
1918	7,863	5,007	3,518		1,489	2,856
1919						
1920	8,372	5,845	4,303		1,542	2,527
1921	8,961	6,388	4,595		1,793	2,573
1922	8,988	6,552	4,725		1,827	2,436
1923	9,022	6,722	4,935		1,787	2,300
1924	9,150	6,990	5,184		1,806	2,160
1925	9,171	7,308	5,435		1,873	1,863
1926	9,500	7,506	5,703		1,803	1,994
1927	9,806	7,747	6,134		1,613	2,059
1928	9,884	8,026	6,420		1,606	1,858
1929	9,611	8,102	6,390		1,713	1,509
1930	9,757	8,289	6,303		1,986	1,468
1932	9,748	8,466	6,698		1,768	1,282
1933	9,833	8,703	6,730		1,973	1,130
1936	9,801	8,843	4,729	2,383	1,731	958

In Miles

Year	Total Length	Auto useable	Coblestone	Asphalt	Dirt Roads (auto usable)	Dirt roads (not auto usable)
1918	4,883	3,109	2,185		925	1,774
1919						
1920	5,199	3,630	2,672		958	1,569
1921	5,565	3,967	2,853		1,113	1,598
1922	5,582	4,069	2,934		1,135	1,513
1923	5,603	4,174	3,065		1,110	1,428
1924	5,682	4,341	3,219		1,122	1,341
1925	5,695	4,538	3,375		1,163	1,157
1926	5,900	4,661	3,542		1,120	1,238
1927	6,090	4,811	3,809		1,002	1,279
1928	6,138	4,984	3,987		997	1,154
1929	5,968	5,031	3,968		1,064	937
1930	6,059	5,147	3,914		1,233	912
1932	6,054	5,257	4,159		1,098	796
1933	6,106	5,405	4,179		1,225	702
1936	6,086	5,492	2,937	1,480	1,075	595

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(1938), 1936-1937, p.p. 113-115

Appendix B

Indochinese Road Devolopment
Length of Roads by state

In Kilometers
Colonial

State	Year	Total Length	Auto Useable	Coblestone	Asphalt	Dirt Roads (auto useable)	Dirt Roads (not auto useable)
Annam	1922	2,737	2,384	1,851		533	353
	1929	3,105	2,768	2,375		393	337
	1930	3,369	2,909	2,303		606	460
	1933	3,359	2,987	2,320		667	372
	1936	3,312	3,074	1,837	497	740	238
Cambodia	1922	1,496	1,145	924		221	351
	1929	1,602	1,405	1,295		110	197
	1930	1,675	1,512	1,451		61	163
	1933	3,359	2,987	2,320		667	372
	1936	1,759	1,668	979	652	37	91
Cochinchina	1922	834	777	734		43	57
	1929	993	974	960		14	19
*Rds. Declass.	1930	729	676	676			53
	1933	649	649	649			
	1936	650	650	153	497		
Loas	1922	1,794	799	230		569	995
	1929	2,164	1,364	615		779	800
	1930	2,186	1,453	668		785	733
	1933	2,336	1,578	814		764	758
	1936	2,258	1,754	991	22	741	504
Tonkin	1922	2,127	1,447	986		461	680
	1929	1,717	1,561	1,145		416	156
	1930	1,798	1,739	1,205		534	59
	1933	1,720	1,720	1,437		283	
	1936	1,822	1,697	769	715	213	125

In Miles
Colonial

State	Year	Total Length	Auto Useable	Coblestone	Asphalt	Dirt Roads (auto useable)	Dirt Roads (not auto useable)
Annam	1922	1,700	1,480	1,149		331	219
	1929	1,928	1,719	1,475		244	209
	1930	2,092	1,806	1,430		376	286
	1933	2,086	1,855	1,441		414	231
	1936	2,057	1,909	1,141	309	460	148
Cambodia	1922	929	711	574		137	218
	1929	995	873	804		68	122

	1930	1,040	939	901		38	101
	1933	2,086	1,855	1,441		414	231
	1936	1,092	1,036	608	405	23	57
Cochinchina	1922	518	483	456		27	35
	1929	617	605	596		9	12
*Rds. Declass.	1930	453	420	420			33
	1933	403	403	403			
	1936	404	404	95	309		
Loas	1922	1,114	496	143		353	618
	1929	1,344	847	382		484	497
	1930	1,358	902	415		487	455
	1933	1,451	980	505		474	471
	1936	1,402	1,089	615	14	460	313
Tonkin	1922	1,321	899	612		286	422
	1929	1,066	969	711		258	97
	1930	1,117	1,080	748		332	37
	1933	1,068	1,068	892		176	
	1936	1,131	1,054	478	444	132	78

Appendix C

Indochinese Road Devolopment
Total Length of Passable Roads by State

In Kilometers
Total

State	**Year**	**Colonial Passable** *cobblestone, asphalt, dirt*	**Local** *" "*	**Total**
Annam	1922	2,384	2,849	5,233
	1929	2,768	3,492	6,260
	1930	2,909	3,077	5,986
	1933	2,987	3,159	6,146
	1936	3,074	3,462	6,536
Cambodia	1922	1,145	1,219	2,364
	1929	1,405	1,199	2,604
	1930	1,512	1,227	2,739
	1933	1,769	2,243	4,012
	1936	1,668	1,820	3,488
Cochinchina	1922	777	3,482	4,259
*Local Includes:	1929	974	5,092	6,066
local, provincial,	1930	676	5,742	6,418
and communal	1933	649	5,514	6,163
	1936	650	6,583	7,233
Laos	1922	799	656	1,455
	1929	1,364	964	2,328
	1930	1,453	913	2,366
	1933	1,578	1,343	2,921
	1936	1,754	1,505	3,259
Tonkin	1922	1,447	5,406	6,853
	1929	1,561	5,154	6,715
	1930	1,739	5,488	7,227
	1933	1,720	4,117	5,837
	1936	1,697	4,005	5,702

In Miles
Colonial

State	**Year**	**Colonial Passable** *cobblestone, asphalt, dirt*	**Local** *" "*	**Total**
Annam	1922	1,480	1,769	3,250
	1929	1,719	2,169	3,887
	1930	1,806	1,911	3,717
	1933	1,855	1,962	3,817
	1936	1,909	2,150	4,059

Cambodia	1922	711	757	1,468
	1929	873	745	1,617
	1930	939	762	1,701
	1933	1,099	1,393	2,491
	1936	1,036	1,130	2,166
Cochinchina	1922	483	2,162	2,645
	1929	605	3,162	3,767
*Rds. Declass.	1930	420	3,566	3,986
	1933	403	3,424	3,827
	1936	404	4,088	4,492
Laos	1922	496	407	904
	1929	847	599	1,446
	1930	902	567	1,469
	1933	980	834	1,814
	1936	1,089	935	2,024
Tonkin	1922	899	3,357	4,256
	1929	969	3,201	4,170
	1930	1,080	3,408	4,488
	1933	1,068	2,557	3,625
	1936	1,054	2,487	3,541

Appendix D

Indochinese Automobile Development
Total Autos by Year

Year	Type	Annam	Cambodia	Cochinchina	Laos	Tonkin	Total
1922	Automobiles	308	403	2,230	21	1,126	4,088
1929	Automobiles	1,392	1,690	8,712	142	4,129	16,065
	Trucks	214	302	671	129	325	1,641
	Buses	495	828	643	45	390	2,401
	Motorcycles	156	137	1,099	41	901	2,334
	Total	2,257	2,957	11,125	357	5,745	22,441
1937	Automobiles	1,600	1,480	6,000	220	4,300	13,600
	Trucks	300	280	620	110	440	1,750
	Buses	300	340	560	50	300	1,550
	Tractors	20	3	240	2	40	305
	Motorcycles	50	50	280	40	200	620
	Total	2,270	2,153	7,700	422	5,280	17,825