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New Lamps for Old

Truong Buu Lam

MARUZEN ASIA

NEW LAMPS FOR OLD:

The Transformation of the Vietnamese Administrative Elite

by
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with the collaboration
of
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PREFACE

The story of how the administration of Vietnam fared under French colonial rule is a rather fascinating one, for it highlights the contradictory assumptions held about the management of society by two nations, each with long administrative traditions of their own, at a time when history pitted them against each other. While a variety of opinions on good government could be found in both countries, especially in France, the clash of two traditions on this issue was nevertheless reduced to this: should the government establish a moral society, as Confucianist philosophy explicitly advocated, or should it nourish a productive society, as Western practice implicitly proposed? A related question was: should the Vietnamese peasantry persist in the tradition of essentially governing itself, or should it be made to comply with the French compulsion to bend all efforts to a central goal? As was to be expected, it was the French, with their greater power, who carried this debate. Indeed, in the course of French rule, the government of Vietnam was so transformed that it became an institution Frenchmen could comfortably recognize, and even approve of. The steps leading to this outcome shed important light on the colonial process, particularly on the types of stresses and strains that a colonial situation engenders in a traditional civilization.

When the French intervened in the 1860s, they found in Vietnam a system of government that had been in existence for a thousand years, ever since the time of independence from China. The form of that government had been borrowed from China and, as in China, it was based upon the principle of absolute monarchical rule, as executed through the institution of the mandarinat. While this governmental form was Chinese in origin, it had nevertheless been successfully adapted to Vietnamese conditions, as its very long career in the adoptive country bears out. One finds in the administration of nineteenth century Vietnam, for example, much that was already in place in the governmental structures of both China and Vietnam in the fifteenth century. Several offices, titles and recruitment procedures, among other things, retained their identity through all those centuries.

The changes initiated by the French in the management of the country were not geographically uniform. The colonial authorities, as is well known, divided the Vietnamese nation into three separate administrative domains: Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin. The regimes instituted in these domains were somewhat distinctive and will have to be examined one by one. All the same, there resulted a consequence of French rule common to the three regions: the emergence of an administrative elite fundamentally different

from the old mandarinat. Whether in the colony of Cochinchina, or in the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin, persons seeking administrative fortunes in the postintervention period had to follow educational paths that carried them further and further away from the Chinese Classics and deeper and deeper into practical fields such as law, administration, or simply the study of the French language. Furthermore, while talent and communal support had played a fair share in launching a man into government service in the past, now it was French favour, proximity to urban colonial schools and, of course, personal wealth, that most counted.

The administration of the villages also underwent a great upheaval. The French compulsion to centralize administration, coupled with the modern state's requirement that men yield surplus products, bore down upon the traditional autonomy of the Vietnamese villages and forced changes upon their leadership. In the end, old, new, hybrid and confused patterns of leadership coexisted, and competed, at both rural and national levels of the Vietnamese government. They will be looked at in this monograph.

In the first part of the work, I shall point out the principal and enduring features of the traditional government of Vietnam and illustrate the same by describing the career of one of the most distinguished members of the nineteenth century mandarinat: Phan Thanh Gian. In the second part of the monograph, I shall first trace the changes in the government that were brought about by the French intervention, and then conclude with my own analyses of the two administrations: traditional and colonial.

This study treads along well-known documentary paths. I have relied greatly upon the biographies of a number of civil servants from about the years 1900 to 1945. Adverse circumstances of time and distance prevented me from consulting new archival material. For a study of an elite group and its transformation, it is glaringly lacking in statistics. I do not, therefore, try to prove anything in what follows. What I try to accomplish, however, is to delineate the major themes in the transformation of the Vietnamese administrative elite in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this work, I lean heavily upon the findings of more than a generation of scholars, present some interpretation of my own, and offer both to students of Vietnamese history in a form which I hope they will find useful as they approach this subject. They, in turn, should not find it difficult to supersede this study.

Before all else I must acknowledge my debts. To the University of Hawaii at Manoa and its History Department, I present my thanks for they granted me sabbatical leave which enabled me to undertake this piece of research and writing, and more. Next, my gratitude goes to Professor Kernial S. Sandhu, Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, and to all its members, who offered me the material comfort of their institution as well as the warm support of their friendship during my stay there as a Research Fellow in 1977-78. Members of the Institute, furthermore, have been kind enough to take it upon themselves to see this monograph into print.

PREFACE

Dr. Huynh Kim Khanh, a long-time friend has brought numerous improvements to this work. The Institute sent my manuscript to an anonymous reviewer who made invaluable suggestions. My unknown benefactor should know that none of the advice given went unheeded. The contribution of my wife, Mai Van, to this monograph surpasses all other. She has painstakingly straightened out my arguments when they were contorted and clarified my style when it was obscure. I have been challenged by the anthropological perspective of her ideas, some of which I have made my own. I would not say that all the good points in this monograph are due to my helpers; I would, however, not hesitate to declare the shortcomings my own.

Honolulu, 1980

CONTENTS

Preface	(vii)
PART ONE: THE VIETNAMESE TRADITIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE ELITE	
I. Evolution of the National Government	3
II. The System of Education and the Mandarin Examinations	9
III. The Mandarin Hierarchy	14
IV. The National Administrative Elite before Colonialism	17
V. Village Government and the Local Elite	19
PART TWO: THE VIETNAMESE ADMINISTRATIVE ELITE IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD	
I. The Administration of Cochinchina	30
II. The Administrative System in Annam and Tonkin	36
III. The End of the Confucian Mandarinate	42
IV. Contemporary Assessments of the Mandarin Institution	49
V. Village Leadership	53

PART ONE

THE VIETNAMESE TRADITIONAL
ADMINISTRATIVE ELITE

UNTIL the middle of the nineteenth century, when the French intervened, the Vietnamese system of government had been based upon the principle of absolute monarchical rule. The emperor¹ governed the country by means of an administrative body organized along Chinese bureaucratic lines. Although the power of the emperor was conceived of as absolute, the actual grasp of his government was never so engineered as to reach into the basic units of the social system which were, in Vietnam, the villages. These, by and large, administered their own affairs, using men and resources that were available locally. The bureaucratic rigidity and royal absolutism that may have characterized the national government yielded, at the village level, to this undoubtedly older pattern of idiosyncratic self-rule. A discussion of the traditional administrative elite, therefore, must always take into account two separate levels of government: the national and the communal. While the personnel that staffed these two levels might on occasion overlap, the social nature of their respective positions differed markedly.

I. EVOLUTION OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

To characterize the government of precolonial Vietnam as a bureaucracy is to say, among other things, that its control was far-ranging and its organization centralized. Furthermore, one would have to say, especially when one considers the history of the rest of Southeast Asia, that that bureaucracy was remarkably long-lived, to the point of tedium. The bureaucratic tradition came with the Chinese occupation of Vietnam (111 B.C. – 939 A.D.), and then outlasted it almost a thousand years.

Vietnam fell prey to Chinese domination and bureaucratic rule at a time when China itself had already been welded into a vast empire administered from the centre by means of a system sometimes called “officialism”.² This system gave an elite class of scholar-officials virtual control over the manpower and resources of China’s vast agrarian expanses. They, in turn, observed a certain internal protocol: all authority rested with the emperor who, however, could delegate it to officials. Scholar-officials thus served at the pleasure of the emperor exclusively and they could neither appropriate nor transmit a position without imperial consent. Their salaries were fixed

1 The Vietnamese monarch was referred to as “king” by the Chinese Court but he was variously called both “king” and “emperor” in his own country.

2 Etienne Balasz, *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy, Variations on a Theme*, trans. by Mary C. Wright (New Haven, 1964), 6.

and their positions hierarchically organized. Entry to office was through one door only, theoretically, and that was the door of the Confucian examinations.

It is evident that Chinese officialism was intimately linked to the ideology of Confucianism which extols virtues supportive of hierarchical organization and, of course, a hierarchical state. The grading of human society is a natural and good thing, Confucianism says, and morality is but the right matching of behaviour to status. To govern was ethical if also comfortable, and to be governed was likewise ethical if somewhat uncomfortable. In the words of Mencius: "Some labour with their minds, and some with their strength. Those who labour with their minds govern others."³ The ideological lubricant that made this system work rather well was the promise that the system held out to the masses: they could always hope that some day, some generation, some descendant would become scholar-official.

When the Chinese conquered Vietnam, in 111 B.C., they decided to rely once more upon the twin tools of officialism and Confucianism. The decision was well taken, obviously, for the pair subsequently fared remarkably well on Vietnamese soil. The choice positions in the Chinese administration of the colony were, of course, reserved for officials sent down from China.⁴ Lesser positions were generally filled by those Vietnamese who had acquired a Chinese education. These were, typically, members of the local ruling families because they, of all groups in Vietnam, would be most exposed to foreign, that is, Chinese, influence. A third source of personnel was the rather large colony of Chinese immigrants normally resident in Vietnam. Some of these were former high officials in China who had simply fallen from grace; others were persons who had been forced to leave because they had backed the wrong political candidate or resisted the right one, as in the case of the usurper, Wang Mang (9-23); still others were outright refugees from the political turmoils that periodically shook China, such as those of the Three Kingdoms, and Sixteen Kingdoms eras. Whatever their reasons, these immigrants soon made themselves at home in neighbouring Vietnam and incidentally introduced its people to Chinese ways.⁵

Although Confucianist ideology did well in Vietnam, it had to contend with a force which had been negligible in China: Buddhism. The Mahayanist version of this religion had earlier entered Vietnam, also by way of China, but in Vietnam, as in Japan, this religion — and its clergy in particular — came

3 James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, II: *The Works of Mencius* (Hong Kong, 1960), 249-50.

4 See the list for some of these officials in Le Tac, *An-nam chi luoc* [Short monograph on Annam] (Hue, 1961), 125.

5 See Nguyen Huu Chau Phan, "Chinh sach cai tri cua nha Tay Han va Dong Han tai Viet Nam" [The colonial policy of the Tung Han and Hsi Han in Vietnam] in *Nghien Cuu Viet Nam*, vol. 1 (1973), 112-25; C.P. Fitzgerald, *The Southern Expansion of the Chinese People* (London, 1972), 1-38; Ha Van Tan and Tran Quoc Vuong, *Lich su che do phong kien Viet Nam* [History of the feudal regime in Vietnam] (Hanoi, 1960), 30-48; and Le Tac, *An-nam chi luoc*, 126-86.

to wield far greater power than it had enjoyed in China.⁶ For one thing, the mandarins in China, over the course of many centuries, had so consolidated their position that they could consistently resist the growth of any institution that might challenge their own.⁷ The same Chinese mandarins doing a temporary stint abroad in Vietnam were less wary of competition and so unwittingly allowed Buddhism to insinuate itself and grow strong. Although Confucian philosophy significantly shaped the government of Vietnam, it never became the ordering principle of thought and action for the whole of society as was the case in China. In the villages of Vietnam, for example, beliefs and practices of a local and primarily atomistic nature prevailed right through the centuries, essentially untouched by Confucianism. By contrast, the Mahayanist form of Buddhism which entered Vietnam brought with it an elaborate pantheon and liturgy which suited rather better the supernatural convictions already held by the Vietnamese peasantry. The fate of a third tradition, Taoism, serves to underline this process of selection and rejection. The philosophical niceties of Taoism never seduced more than a coterie of highly sophisticated Vietnamese scholars. Magical Taoist practices, on the other hand, were eagerly accepted by the populace and Taoist deities soon acquired niches right alongside Buddhist figures in the now greatly expanded Vietnamese pantheon.⁸

In the early years of the tenth century, while China was embroiled in the struggle of the Five Dynasties (909-960), Vietnam cast about for its independence. Ngo Quyen, a local chieftain and an able general, was one of the first to shake off the Nan Han kingdom's rule over Vietnam and to proclaim its independence in the year 939. His achievement, however, soon disintegrated as a series of struggles, pitting various chieftains and local administrators against one another, broke out over the next decade. The contenders had come to enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy in the last years of Chinese colonization; they now resisted the emergence of a new central authority that would weaken them, even when that central authority was Vietnamese. Against these competitors, Ngo Quyen's successors proved helpless. The civil war dragged on until 968, when Dinh Bo Linh, an officer in the service of a chieftain, emerged victorious over the remaining "warlords". The unification of the country was formalized in 979 when Le Hoan, Commander of the Dinh army, became king in the absence of a suitable Dinh heir.

6 See Tran van Giap, "Le Bouddhisme en Annam des origines au XIII siecle" in BEFEO, 32 (1932), 191-268, and Le Thanh Khoi, *Le Vietnam, Histoire et Civilisation* (Paris, 1955), 111.

7 See E. Zurcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden, 1960), 254-85.

8 Jean Herbert, *An Introduction to Asia*, trans. Manu Bannerji (New York, 1968), 70, and Toan Anh, *Nep cu-tin nguong Viet Nam* [Tradition and Religious Beliefs of the Vietnamese] (Saigon, 1969), 201-25.

The Le dynasty which he founded, known in Vietnamese history as the Former Le dynasty (979-1009), began to build up the country's administrative structures. In the process, the dynasty turned a former enemy into something of an exemplar. Given the absence of any other governmental system which was either available or familiar, the Le rulers decided to borrow profusely from Chinese administrative models. At first, the Vietnamese Court had to staff the national civil service with Buddhist monks and Buddhist scholars because, after so many years of civil strife, during which formal Confucian education had been suspended, few other learned persons remained. The Buddhist shrines and monasteries had kept themselves relatively apolitical, and therefore intact as centres of learning.⁹ The Le emperors may have had another reason for shying away from the traditional instruments of power: Confucian scholars had served previous administrations and had become partisan. They were not, therefore, to be trusted.

A second organized faction could then be found in Vietnam, and that was the army, to which the new dynasty in fact owed its throne. This force too was passed over in the new administrative organization precisely because the Le did not wish to further aggrandize the power of the military. Hence, the Buddhist church alone provided the court with an untried and, it was hoped, an unthreatening elite! As it turned out, the fledgling dynasty proved itself too weak and no match at all for the Buddhist hierarchy which unseated it in 1009 in favour of an amenable court official named Ly Cong Uan, who thus came to found the Ly dynasty (1009-1225).

Ironically, it was this very dynasty and the subsequent Tran dynasty (1225-1400), both well-known for their devotion to Buddhism, that set about incorporating fully the Chinese mandarin system into the Vietnamese government. Inevitably, this meant that Confucianism would become the ideology of the governing elite while Buddhism would have to recede into the rural communities of the powerless. This ideological transition becomes evident when one looks at the changing nature of the mandarin examinations. The year 1075 marked the first time that these examinations were held in the capital of an independent Vietnam.

At first, these examinations tested students on their knowledge of the three religions — Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Less than two hundred years later, Confucianism had risen above the other two creeds in importance and, indeed, the last "three religious examinations" seemed to have been held in 1267.¹⁰ The justification for doing away with questions on Buddhist and Taoist learning was advanced in a rather well-articulated piece by the fifteenth century Vietnamese historian, Ngo Si Lien:

9 Phan Huy Chu, *Lich Trieu Hien Chuong Loai Chi* [The institutions of successive dynasties arranged according to subject] (Hanoi, 1961), II, 6.

10 Ngo Si Lien, *Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu* [A Complete History of Dai Viet] (Hanoi, 1967), I, 236, and *Lich trieu hien chuong* . . . , III, 6.

Buddhism and Taoism are so complicated and, paradoxically, so vague, he argued, that hardly anyone can claim to master them. In the rare case that someone might be fully conversant in the sacred texts of both these religions, his usefulness to the world and the nation would, nevertheless, still be in doubt, and his suitability for office, therefore, questionable.¹¹

Thus, from 1267 on until 1919, Confucian examinations became established as the principal avenue into the administrative services of the country. Subsidiary avenues were sometimes available, as in the case of extraordinary royal appointments or through the usual pandering, bribery and outright purchases of title.

The Tran dynasty further formalized the structures of government in 1236 when it drew up a schedule of salaries to be paid to state employees.¹² It simultaneously defined the authority, duty and privilege proper to each level of the administrative hierarchy so that officials might observe the proper etiquette and chain of command with respect to one another. These two measures were aimed at removing some of the feudal practices which had lingered on in the central government and that sought to uphold the tradition of hereditary privilege against the new concept of meritocracy.

Later on, during the second Le dynasty (1428-1788), and particularly under the reign of Le Thanh Tong (1460-1497), the mandarinat underwent further reorganization, both at the central and regional levels.¹³ In particular, the civil and military branches of the mandarinat became somewhat more distinct. Titles and functions in the regional services were also better defined.

By the time the Nguyen dynasty ascended the throne (1802), which was some fifty years before the first French annexation of part of Vietnam, the mandarinal machine was long in place, functioning smoothly and, one might say, effortlessly.¹⁴ A small number of scholar-officials recruited through the examinations were running the entire apparatus of the state. Early French observers of the system lavishly praised its democratic character:

The most absolute equality existed among the citizens, for its public offices were open to all and there were no other social distinctions than talent, rank of office and . . . wealth.¹⁵

11 *Lich trieu hien chuong* . . . , III, 6.

12 *Lich trieu hien chuong* . . . , II, 71.

13 See Le Kim Ngan, *To chuc chinh guyen duoi thoi Le Thanh Tong* [The organisation of the central government under the reign of Le Thanh Tong] (Saigon, 1962), and John K. Whitmore, "The Development of Le Government in 15th Century Vietnam" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1968).

14 See Nguyen Si Hai, "To chuc chinh quyen trung uong thoi Nguyen so (1802-1867)" [The organisation of the central government during the early years of the Nguyen dynasty] (Saigon, LL.D. thesis, n.d.).

15 E. Luro, *Cours d'administration annamite* (Saigon, 1878), 38.

At the time of the French conquest, Vietnamese society consisted of two principal classes: scholar-administrators and peasant-producers. If we do not count village notables as agents of the state, since their authority emanated not from the centre but from local acquiescence, the power of the traditional Vietnamese state may be said to have rested entirely on its scholar-officials. This traditional elite corps wielded tremendous power over the country for it was charged with regulating minute details of the people's lives: from the size of their houses, the colour and the shape of their clothes to the format for their funerals.¹⁶

No other organized elite existed to challenge this literate and administrative body because in no other sphere of activity could one gain social prominence. Wealth, of course, always confers power, but it brought no particular privileges except those that wealth could sometimes purchase, such as a mandarin title. To enjoy the honours of this world, in Vietnam, even a wealthy person needed to be assimilated into the only social group that counted. Because the professional functions of warfare, adjudication, administration and, to a certain extent, ritual were preempted by the mandarinates, there was little ground left in traditional Vietnamese society over which a rival profession might exercise power and consequently provoke change. Priests, healers, fortune-tellers — these might achieve some renown, but only of the sort that was personal and ephemeral.

The road to officialdom was long and arduous. In practice, few could embark on it. By way of illustration, I shall describe the career of a famous mandarin: Phan Thanh Gian (1796-1867). A native of that southern part of Vietnam which was conquered from the Kingdom of Cambodia in the early eighteenth century, Phan Thanh Gian was the first candidate from his region to pass the mandarin examinations. After several promotions and some demotions, he was finally sent as Special Envoy of the Emperor to the three western provinces of Cochinchina in 1865. Two years earlier, French troops had come in and occupied the three neighbouring provinces to the East of these. They soon proceeded to absorb Phan Thanh Gian's territory as well. The Special Envoy surrendered the provinces under his command to the

16 As late as the beginning of the nineteenth century, some Vietnamese women were still wearing a sarong-like garment commonly seen in Southeast Asia, rather than trousers. Emperor Minh Mang (1820-40), who wanted to standardize the dress of his subjects, subsequently decreed that, henceforth, women as well as men must don trousers. The reaction of the women to that decree is recorded in the ditty:

The imperial decree of the fourth day of the third month
 Requiring women to wear trousers spread terror among us;
 If we don't go out, the market will not convene;
 If we do go out, shall we have the heart to undress our husbands?
 Let those women who have trousers go to the market;
 And those who don't, let them line up along the village gate to greet the mandarins.

French without giving a fight, then proceeded to commit suicide. It was 1867 and he was seventy-one. The note he left behind explained that, having been convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt of the superiority of European arms, he could not bring himself to command the wasteful deaths of his subordinates.¹⁷

II. THE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION AND THE MANDARINAL EXAMINATIONS¹⁸

Phan Thanh Gian came from a humble family. He was born in the village of Tan Thanh, in the present province of Ben Tre.¹⁹ The village was first settled in 1790. Its sandy soil made it unfit for paddy growing and it always remained poor. Gian used to say that, although he grew up in a region called the granary of the nation, his family almost never ate rice. His father was a clerk of lowly rank in one of the governmental offices of Vinh Long province.

Like most youngsters in the rural areas, Gian went to a private school in the village. In fact, in the villages of Vietnam, there were then no governmental schools. The formal education of children was left to private initiative. Retired mandarins or other learned men could, at any time, open a class and enrol students. Such teachers asked for no particular fee: they were paid in kind by the parents. In some places, students formed small associations that went from door to door seeking contributions for their teachers. Elsewhere, villages might set aside the yield of a small portion of the communal lands for the maintenance of the local educators.

The curriculum of village schools consisted of four standard texts: *Tam thien tu* [The book of three thousand words]; *Tam tu kinh* [The three words classic]; *Minh tam bao giam* [The mirror of clear mind]; and *Hieu kinh* [The classic of filial piety]. All four sets of books were written in a simple and rhythmic style which facilitated memorization. The teacher familiarized his pupils with a number of Chinese characters, gave them texts to memorize

17 See Truong Buu Lam, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention: 1858-1900* (New Haven, 1967), 87-88.

18 For more information, see Buu Duong, *The Confucian Tradition in the History of Vietnamese Education* (Thesis, Harvard University, 1957-58), and A.B. Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Cambridge, 1971), 169-233.

19 Phan Thanh Gian's biographical data are drawn from P. Daudin and Le Van Phuc, "Phan Thanh Gian, 1796-1867, et sa famille d'apres quelques documents annamites" in BSEI, t. 27, 2 (1941), 1-158, and a special issue of *Su Dia* on Phan Thanh Gian titled: "Dac Khao ve Phan Thanh Gian," vol. 7-8 (Saigon, 1967).

and, above all, inculcated in them the rudiments of Confucian ethics. The emphasis at this stage was on the building of character, not literary proficiency.

Phan Thanh Gian seemed not to have progressed beyond the village school until a family misfortune unexpectedly opened up a bright future. His father, it was reported, committed a misdemeanour in the course of his duties for which he was sentenced to a year in the provincial jail of Vinh Long. Gian, then aged twenty, followed his father into the city in order to minister to him. There, he met a provincial judge who urged him to remain in Vinh Long to pursue higher studies. This judge then took it upon himself to send Gian to a private school headed by a scholar named Vo. There must have been, in the provincial capital of Vinh Long, as in any other provincial capital, a government school where Gian could have studied. The central government normally placed such schools under the direction of a *doc hoc*, an official who held the highest possible academic title: *tien si*. Besides heading the provincial school, the *doc hoc* also supervised the work of the *giao tho* and *huan dao* who were directors of the public schools at the prefectural and district levels respectively. *Giao tho* and *huan dao* held the lesser academic degrees of *cu nhan* or *tu tai*. But there were students like Gian who preferred to study with a private teacher, as a matter of convenience, or because a particular teacher enjoyed a high reputation.

One might indeed wonder how Gian's family — poor to begin with and poorer still after the father's brush with the law — could afford to let one of its members become nonproductive, let alone finance his education. Luckily for Gian, a rich family in Vinh Long decided to provide him with the material necessities of a scholastic life. Students from poor families were not generally so fortunate, but assistance of one kind or another could often be found: the student might work as a part-time tutor in a rich family; if he was especially bright, he might be supported by the well-to-do of his own village, or even by the village community itself out of its communal budget. Sponsors of students were aware that their sponsorship represented an investment in the future. Should their proteges pass the examinations and become mandarins, they too stood to gain in material and honorific advantages. Although officials were not, as a rule, posted in their native localities, the benefits of having a fellow-villager in the national government were nevertheless very real and fully appreciated. A popular saying puts it this way: "When one person becomes mandarin, the entire village can count on him."

In precolonial Vietnam, when a man turned eighteen, he became subject to the government head tax, which he had to pay in half until the age of twenty when the full rate then applied. In addition, all healthy males aged twenty and over committed forty days of labour to the government annually. Students received exemptions from both the labour and head taxes if they passed the provincial examinations held at least once a year in the provincial capitals. They could sit for their examinations only if their names had