



## The Visit of Rabindranath Tagore and Dynamics of Nationalism in Colonial Vietnam



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### [ *Abstract* ]

Numerous journalistic and literary writings about the Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian awardee of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1913), appeared in newspapers of colonial Vietnam. His stop-over in Saigon (Cochin China) in 1929 created political discussions in contemporary journalism and other publications. Tagore and his visit to Saigon inspired Vietnamese intellectuals and stirred diverse anti-colonial thought. This paper examines writings and images about Tagore in colonial Vietnamese journals and newspapers, reconstructing how intellectuals recalled and imagined him as they also engaged with anti-colonial thought, particularly anti-colonial modernity and anti-capitalism. Contextualizing the reception of Tagore in colonial projects of modernizing the Vietnamese colony, the paper argues that discussions inspired by Tagore's visit embody contemporary nationalist ideology.

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, anti-colonial modernity, anti-capitalism, colonial Vietnamese intellectuals, Vietnamese anti-colonialism

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## I . Introduction

In the 1920s, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), appeared extensively in Vietnamese periodicals. Local intellectuals, many of them western-educated and largely gathering in Saigon, included Tagore's life and works became the subject of exchanges on nationalist thought, especially after his visit to Saigon in 1929. Studying periodicals about Tagore, this study delineates looks at how the writer and thinker was perceived and inspired contemporary nationalist thought of Vietnamese intellectuals. In contextualizing writings about Tagore in the French government's projects of colonizing the Vietnamese people, the paper argues that the reception of Tagore in colonial Vietnam embodies anti-colonial sentiments, particularly on anti-colonial modernity and anti-capitalism.

## II . Tagore's Visit

The news that Tagore would make a stop-over in Saigon on his way back to India from China in 1924 first reached *La Cloche Fêlée*, a newspaper that was "ideologically revolutionary" (Peycam 2015: 183) and founded by Nguyễn An Ninh (1900-1943), "one of best known anti-French activists" (Truong Buu Lam 200: 190). In the April 7, 1924 issue of the paper, there was an announcement by Hindu societies in Saigon that Tagore had left Calcutta and would visit Saigon. And on April 21, 1924, *La Cloche Fêlée* announced the change of Tagore's itinerary: although the reception for Tagore in Saigon was already organized, he would not visit Saigon due to his health problems after giving a speech in Hong Kong. The French version of the essay "Mon École" [My School] by Tagore occupied pages of *La Cloche Fêlée* published on May 19 and June 2, 1924. Nguyễn An Ninh quoted Tagore many times in *La Cloche Fêlée* in an attempt to present his engagement with "anarchist ideas" (Ho Tam Hue Tai 1996: 82). In "L'ideál de la Jeunesse Annamite" [Aspiration of Vietnamese Youth], delivered on October 15, 1923 for the Association for the Encouragement of Study, Ninh mentioned Tagore and other "great Indians" as inspiring Vietnamese people to be more aware of their participation in the revolution. The most

striking evidence for Ninh's appreciation of Tagore is that in the first volume of *La Cloche Fêlée*, issued on January 7, 1924, an epigraph by Tagore was placed at the top right corner of the first page in big and bold letters: "Those who love to dominate foreign races leave their true liberty and humanism for the support of mechanics, which is necessary to keep other people in slavery. On the other hand, the degradation of personal pride and individual interest damages true humanism. Consequently, there would be terrible consequences in the aftermath."<sup>1</sup> Another article by Ninh, "A un Confrère du Nord," issued on March 17, 1924, dwelt on Tagore's ideas of race, nationalism and internationalism. Also in 1924, Ninh wrote "Patriotisme chez Tagore" under the pen name "Nguyễn Tịnh"; the article filled five columns of the June 16, 1924 issue. And, in a long article, entitled "La Sagesse du cochon" [Wisdom of the Animal] published on November 26, 1925, Ninh praised Tagore for his thoughts about Brahma and human harmony.

Another contemporary Vietnamese intellectual who admired Tagore as much as Nguyễn An Ninh was Phạm Quỳnh and other contributors of *Nam Phong tạp chí*. They expressed their belief in the colonial policy of Franco-Vietnamese harmony (Ho Tam Hue Tai 82; McHale 84). In 1924, a series of articles about Tagore was published in *Nam Phong tạp chí*, in celebration of his planned visit to Saigon. Volumes 83 and 84 (1924) contained the article "Một nhà đại thi sĩ Ấn Độ: ông R.Tagore" [The Great Indian Poet: Mr. Rabindranath Tagore] and the *quốc ngữ* version of Tagore's speech, "Declaration of the East," as well a response by Maurice Croiset, a medical doctor and a professor at the Sorbonne University. Moreover, volumes 93 and 94 in 1924 include the article "Đất châu Á mới - hai nhân vật - hai sự nghiệp" [The New Asian Land - Two Characters - Two Careers] by Sylvain Lévi, who was the first foreign lecturer at Visva - Bharata University of Tagore and who had an "intimate [relationship] with Tagore and his circle" (Tagore 1997: 353).

Tagore's visit to Saigon in June 1929 caused a considerable

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes in Vietnamese and French in this paper are translated to English by the author.

uproar in colonial Vietnam among colonial officials, journalists, politicians, and the common people. A large amount of news and articles about Tagore and his visit found a dominant place in contemporary legal “political opposition newspapers” (Peycam 2015: 262). These newspaper are *L’Écho annamite*, *La Tribune Indchinoise*, *Đông Pháp thời báo (Indochina Times)*, *La Cloche Fêlée*, and other non-communist progress newspapers such as *Thần Chung* (successor of *Đông Pháp Thời Báo*), *Công giáo đồng thịnh* (the new Catholic daily), *Đuốc Nhà Nam*, and *Phụ nữ tân văn* (Ho Tai Hue-Tam 1996: 206; Peycam 2015: 171-4). Among these newspapers, *Tribune Indochinoise* and *Đuốc Nhà Nam*, founded by the two constitutionalists Bùi Quang Chiêu (1873-1944) and Dương Văn Giáo (1892-1945) respectively, were the official mouthpieces of the event. Bùi Quang Chiêu and Dương Văn Giáo were also leading members of the official Welcome Committee. Articles and photos published in *La Tribune Indchinoise*, *Đuốc Nhà Nam*, *L’echo annamite* and *Thần Chung* captured Tagore’s visit in colonial Vietnam.

In late June 1929, Tagore did indeed stopover in Saigon on the way back from Canada where he had attended the Conference of the National Council of Education in Vancouver as a representative of India. In fact, after his stay in Canada, Tagore had spent a month in Japan giving lectures and interviews. When he prepared for his return to India, representatives of the French Embassy invited him to come to Indo-China and to make a tour through the colony. His reaction was positive; he thought he would be able to visit Angkor Wat. However, doctors in Japan strongly and secretly advised Chanda, Tagore’s secretary, to prevent him to visit Angkor. The French Embassy in Japan also instructed Saigon officials to keep the visit to Angkor Wat out of the program (Roy 2011: 2011). Tagore sailed for India in a French postal boat, *S.S. Angers*, and reached Saigon at 11:30 am on June 21, 1929.

The cabinet chef of the Cochin China government, Noueilhetas, and M. Samy, a Hindu, arrived at Nhà Bè Harbor to make sure everything was set up for the ship’s arrival. Bùi Quang Chiêu and M. Béziat (1894-?), president of the Council of Cochinchina (Clauzel 494), came later and warmly greeted Tagore in French in the first lounge of the ship, where Tagore had lunch (*Le*

*Tribune Inchinoise* 21/6/1929). Tagore responded in English through Mme. Palard (?),<sup>2</sup> who was invited by Chiêu to be the interpreter. “Common people” (thiên hạ) eagerly climbed up the ship to see Tagore; a white cloth banner reading “Welcome Rabindranath Tagore-Youth and Labor” was hung in the harbor. Tagore was dressed in black; he had worn a velvet cap, and his hair was white. A group of young people offered him a bouquet of flowers (*L’echo annamite* 17/6/1929; *L’echo annamite* 20/6/1929).

Tagore’s activities during his time in Saigon were strictly organized in a tightly-organized program by the Welcome Committee. The first day of Tagore’s visit was June 21, 1929. First, “To welcome Tagore, a Champagne party has been organized” at Hôtel de Ville at 6 pm (*Đuốc Nhà Nam* 18/6/1929). The party was attended by representatives of the Annamite, the Hindu and the French communities as well as by representatives of journals and of governmental officials. Béziat bowed his head while welcoming Tagore on behalf of his city and gave a speech appreciating Tagore as the poet of a nation and the world and praising his poems as having provided human beings a means to express their sorrows (*Le Tribune Inchinoise* 21/6/1929). Béziat’s speech was in French; Kerjean translated it into English. A second reception was organized at the Theatre Principal at 9 pm. Seats in the Theater were filled with Indians, French and Annamese; tickets for entry and “back seats” (trên chót) were respectively \$1.00 (piastre) and \$0.50. Three public speeches were delivered, including “Présentation du Rabindra Nath Tagore,” “Address A. Ranbindra Nath Tagore,” and “Traduction de l’ allocution de Rabindra Nath Tagore,” by constitutionalists Bùi Quang Chiêu, Dương Văn Giáo and Trần Văn Trí (chief editor of *La Tribune Indochina*), respectively. The English speech of Tagore had been translated into French before the meeting. The French translation was read by Jacques Đức (?),<sup>3</sup> and the *quốc ngữ* translation was read by Hồ Văn Nguơn, chief editor of *Đuốc Nhà Nam*. According to reports, “As soon as Tagore entered the theater, the audience stood up with bated breath… listening to Tagore’s speech, the audience was so quiet that the buzz of mosquitoes were

<sup>2</sup> There is no record about this people.

<sup>3</sup> No data about this person has been found yet.

audible" (*Thần Chung* 23-24/6/1929). Both journalists of French and *quốc ngữ* were invited. At this party, journalists including Lê Thành Lư (1898), Huỳnh Phúc Yên (penname: Focylene; editor of *Công giáo đồng thời*) and Trường Gia Kỳ Sanh (Trúc Viên), members of the Indochinese Labour Party (founded in 1926 in Saigon), invited Tagore to give a speech to Vietnamese peasants and workers. Tagore agreed tentatively.

On the second day, Tagore met the governor of Cochin China in the early morning. Tagore again mentioned his desire to visit Angkor Wat and he asked for some books about Indochina for his university. Thirty minutes later, Tagore was taken by car to visit L' Ecole de poterie [College of Fine Art] in Biên Hòa. On this visit, he was accompanied by Jean Kerjean (secretary of Court de' Appel and interpreter), Trần Văn Kha (colonial counselor), Trần Khắc Nương (delegate of the Municipal Council), Tamby (cadastral commissioner), Hồ Văn Ngun (representative of Annamite journalists), Chanda (secretary of the Poet) and several Hindu members. The chief of Biên Hòa province and the director of the college welcomed Tagore, guiding him through classes and showrooms to see artistic works in ceramic and bronze. Tagore bought a ceramic vase and two lampshades for his students in his university named Santiniketan. He was particularly impressed with the white stone vases painted with yellow flowers. At the end of the visit, Tagore signed the visitors' book of the College. Tagore's third activity was to visit the tomb of Lê Văn Duyệt, a 19th-century mandarin who rescued Christian missionaries. On his arrival, Annamite music was played at the gate to welcome him. Tagore did not join the tea party that had been organized by administrators of the tomb; the journey to Biên Hòa over bad roads had tired him (*Đuốc nhà nam* 27/6/1929).

Also on the second day, Tagore was given a big champagne party in the Union Printing House, owned by the district chief, Nguyễn Văn Cửa. The owner, his employees and the members of the Welcome Committee, stood in queue to welcome Tagore. Tagore talked with two Bengali workers. Then, he asked for a cup of coconut juice, and showed great curiosity in Cửa's collection of ancient artistic items. The district chief offered Tagore a model of an Annamite battleship, red lacquered and trimmed with gold, as a gift

(*Đuốc nhà nam* 27/6/1929). The photographer Khánh Kì took two photos of Tagore in Cúa's company. At 9 pm that evening, Tagore went to the Eden Cinema in Saigon.

On the third day, Tagore took a visit to Catinat Street, accompanied by Bùi Quang Chiêu, Nguyễn Đức Nhuận (1900-1968, chief editor of the newspaper *Phụ nữ tân văn* [Women's News]) and Lê Trung Nghĩa (1904-1947, a political cartoonist of *La Tribune Indochinoise*, *Đông Pháp thời báo*, and *Đuốc nhà Nam*); he visited to several Bombay shops and one Annam textile shop. Wastamull, owner of a Bombay textile store, guided Tagore to see the Bombay shops on Catinat Street. Tagore bought the "essential objects" of Annam, a piece of brocade; and together with Nguyễn Đức Nhuận, he watched how a piece of satin was woven and dyed by local people. At Espagne Street, Tagore asked a tailor, named Trần Thái Nguyên, to make an Annamite tunic for him. The Annamite costume, a bright brocade shirt, white silk trousers, Gia Định shoes, and crepe hat made Tagore look like an old Annamite man. In "Rabindranth Tagore ghé viếng tòa báo Phụ nữ tân văn" [Tagore visits the editorial office of *Phụ nữ tân văn* newspaper], Nguyễn Đức Nhuận told his readers that he had expected that Tagore was as dark as other Indians he met, but as it turned out, he had "a white and smooth skin, high nose, broad forehead... his hands are elegant and noble, his fingers are white and round; he was born in a high-class family; every day he composes poetry and plays music" (*Phụ nữ tân văn* 4/7/1929). Later, at a reception hosted by the Chinese Chamber at the "Pagoda Cantonese,"<sup>4</sup> located Cây Mai Street, Chợ Lớn (Saigon), Tagore conversed with some members about the importance of Chinese knowledge for Asia and India.

Then, Tagore participated in a religious ceremony of the Hindu community at the Chetty Pagoda.<sup>5</sup> A group of Indians came to the Chamber's reception and brought Tagore and his companions to a car decorated with flowers to the Pagoda for Lễ nhất châu diên Viện tàng thơ Murugananda Vasagasala [The Opening Ceremony of the Institute of Poetry Murugananda Vasagasala]. Tagore was invited

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<sup>4</sup> This is called Chùa Bà Thiên Hậu or Chùa Bà Chợ Lớn in Vietnamese.

<sup>5</sup> Read more about this Indian community in Paireudeau (2010): 1-71.

to lead the ceremony along with Bùi Quang Chiêu and Lefebvre, Vice-President of Saigon. Garlands were offered to Tagore, Chiêu, and Lefebvre; other members of the Welcome Committee were offered with flower garlands. A girl named Kathéappa Thévarvin chanted a song by Passecarane, an Indian poet, to honor Tagore. The Indians gave Tagore a gift of 2101 piasure, which was placed in the middle of a tray of betel leaves. It was explained to him that the odd number was for good luck. Xavier, Vice - President of the Pagoda's Welcome Committee, gave a talk. At the end of the day, Tagore met with the Governor General, Pierre Pasquie; they discussed relations between East and West. The Governor General promised to send books about Indochina to Santiniketan, a school in India founded by Tagore.

When Tagore returned to his guest residence, representatives of the Indochinese Labor Party came and accused Tagore of not giving a speech to workers as he had promised. The Labor Party's leader gave a warning that he would organize his people for a demonstration to disturb Tagore and Chiêu at the harbor and to insult them in public. However, the interpreter did not translate the hostile reactions of Lê Thành Tư. Tagore enjoyed dinner that evening and left Saigon at 9:30 pm.

Not only news about Tagore's visit but also writings by Tagore and articles by Vietnamese about Tagore were published on the occasion of his visit. Bùi Quang Chiêu recalled his trip to Tagore's university during mid-January 1929 and how he was attracted by Tagore's high and bold figure in 21 volumes of *La Tribune Indochinoise* issued from March to June 1929 and in the three-column article "Rabin Dranath Tagore" [Rabindranath Tagore] published on June 17, 1929. The literary and political journal *Phụ nữ tân văn*, on June 27, 1929, published the article "Ông Rabindranth Tagore" by Thạch Lan; it was written in poetic verse, praising Tagore's self-education and love of nature. This article analyzes poems of Tagore in comparison with the ones by Nguyễn Du and Nguyễn Bình Khiêm. On October 30, 1930, *Phụ nữ tân văn* published an article about Santiniketan University of Tagore. The article was embellished with two photos: one of Tagore teaching his students, the other of female students.



Writings by Tagore were also reprinted or translated in Vietnamese language. *La Tribune Indinoise* on June 3 and 7, 1929 re-printed the long report by Tagore about his “Souvenirs de l’ He de Bali” [Memories of Bali] that had been published in *École française d’Extrême-Orient*. Tagore’s message about peace, unity between Asian and Western countries, and humanism in “la Religion du Poète” [Religion of the Poet] was also quoted and analyzed in a three-column article, entitled “Rabin Dranath Tagore” [Rabindranath Tagore] on June 17, 1929. *Đuốc nhà Nam* translated Tagore’s letter, “The Spirit of Freedom.” The Vietnamese version of “Một vài tư tưởng của ông Tagore” [Some Thoughts of Tagore] in *Phụ nữ tân văn* dated July 4, 1929 was published concurrently with the French version.

## II . Portrayal of Tagore and Anti-Modernity in Colonial Vietnam

The discussions of Tagore’s visit to colonial Vietnam has been interpreted as the embodiment of pan-Asianism in the early twentieth century. Chi P. Pham (2021) argued that Vietnamese intellectuals in colonial Vietnam tended to embellish Tagore’s visit with the imaginings of Annam’s intrinsic cultural connection to the greater world called “Asia.” In presenting Tagore as a savior, a prophet, or a politician, Vietnamese intellectuals looked up to Indian politicians as nationalist models for inspiration and trust. Pham asserted that India was “a benign and uncoercive world civilizer and font of global enlightenment” and the common perspective of the expansion of Greater India as “a process of religious and spiritual tutelage” (Bayly 2014: 736). According to Pham, this national perspective is a particularly important context, as Vietnamese opposition to French colonialism pushed anticolonialists more deeply into the Asian region, making a series of new intellectual, cultural, and revolutionary connections with other Asians in the world outside (Goscha 2004).

However, this paper does not emphasize Vietnamese nationalism, derived from the reception of Tagore, as an extended version of pan-Asianism as such. Instead, it argues that the talk of

Tagore and his visit reflect public anti-modernity sentiments, which embodied contemporary anti-colonial thought. In order to do so, this paper contextualizes creative and journalistic presentations of Tagore in literary and journalistic expressions of anti-modernity that critically merged colonial Vietnam in the 1920s.

The photo of Tagore by Khánh Kỳ, published in *Le Tribune Indochinoise* (June 24, 1929) and *Phụ nữ tân văn* (July 4, 1929), presented Tagore as a symbol of spiritual and serene easternness. The photo does not capture Tagore from the front but from one side to make Tagore's long and thick hair and beard stand out. Those visual signs apparently encoded visual perceptions of Tagore as a representative of the Orient. In Vietnamese expression, Tagore in the photos looks like "ông tiên"—a virtual god-man in folktales. In addition, the gaze of Tagore forms the focal point of the photo. The visualization of Tagore, who looks neither downward nor upward but forward and into the distance, shows the spiritual fantasy of a serene state and the love for thinking and foresight. And the painting of Tagore by Lê Trung Nghĩa, published in *La Tribune Indochinoise* on June 26, 1929, also revealed insights into the spiritual nature of the envisioned indigenous culture. The painting with the note "the signature on the photo is of the poet" offered additional significance to the traditional model of intensive contemplation of Eastern-ness embodied in the mental image of Tagore. Lê Trung Nghĩa portrayed Tagore sitting at a table with a book (or a notebook) and holding a pen. Tagore was depicted looking at the book, but his eyes, which are looking at some infinite point, do not show that he was reading but implies that he is in meditation. Again, the portrait does not capture Tagore from the front but from the side. Such portraits suggest Vietnamese intellectuals' attempts to accentuate the fundamental spirituality of the indigenes.

Tagore also figured in writing as a symbol of local cultural values. *Phụ nữ tân văn* (1929-1934), a literary and political newspaper, in the issue of July 4, 1929 published a description of Tagore in traditional Vietnamese dress:

He wanted to take a walk on Saigon streets in an Annamese dress... Immediately the next morning, on the crowded streets of Saigon, there was a big Indian man with white hair and beard; he was dressed in a Vietnamese bright brocade tunic, white silk trousers, Gia Dinh shoes, and crepe hat and walked peacefully; he looked as if he was a real Saigonese (*Quân đội nhân dân*)

Mme. Nguyễn Đức Nhuận, the author, compared and connected the figure and appearance of Tagore with those of so-called “real” Saigonese people and “real” “Gia đình” people. The detail of “Annamese dress” and “Vietnamese tunic” suggests the idea of “Vietnam as a whole,” an idea for which the activist, journalist Diệp Văn Kỳ (1895-1945) founded *Phụ nữ tân văn*. That is, the idealized Vietnamese nation must include cultural traditions of “the whole of Vietnam” including Saigon, Northern Vietnam and Central Vietnam (Peycam 2015: 266-267).

Through writing about Tagore, Vietnamese intellectuals addressed the unfortunate disappearance of cultural connections between India and Annam. In the welcome reception, Dương Văn Giáo suggested that religion and morality were two factors that helped to maintain the cultural uniqueness in Annam. He grieved that it was unfortunate that the valuable ancientness of India in Annam was erased from these historical records. The intellectual traffic between India and Vietnam stopped. Giáo believed that with religious beliefs and moral customs, India could still survive and develop regardless colonial presence: “Today [Tagore] comes here and we have a chance to see [him] in person; that makes us more confident that India is still alive” (*Thần Chung* 25/6/1929) Vietnamese intellectuals’ beliefs in local moral and spirituality are more obvious in their emphasis on Tagore’s nostalgia for the disappearance of Indian culture from Annam, which also meant the collapse of traditional cultures of Vietnamese people. This tradition is presented in intensively emotional Vietnamese expressions: during his visit, Tagore brought to Annamite people evidence of the time when Annamite and Indian cultures met together in the aim of awakening Vietnamese spiritual traditions; the Indian soul was once vibrant across the sunny beaches of Annam land and the ancient Indian remains there; India brought many thinkers to convey

beautiful ideas to this land; [despite modernization,] the soul of India is still in his mind; he walked on Annam land as though he was walking around the countryside of his hometown (*Thần Chung* 23-24/6/1929). The use of rhetorical figures and poetic speeches aimed to touch upon Annamite sensitivity about the loss of beautiful cultures. Those cultures as provoked in these speeches must be restored by recovering ancient connections between Annam and India.

The characteristic of the Indian origins of Annamese culture was supposed to be tranquil and peaceful. The ambiguity and serenity of an idealized Vietnamese tradition were embedded into appreciations of Tagore as the reminder to Vietnamese audiences of their uttermost indigenoussness. Phạm Đình Khương in his paper “Thuyết bác ái và chủ nghĩa hòa bình” [The Theory of Humanity and Pacification] in *Công giáo đồng thịnh* (25 June, 1929) described in solemn tone a peaceful and serene atmosphere pervading over the indigenous land and implied that such atmosphere was nurtured by Tagore’s visit:

These days, after a peaceful sleep, our mind and our body become more vital... These days, on the roads, all of our people including French, Indians (chà), and thousands of Annamites, and our relatives, friends and visitors have happy smiles on their lips. Are we too optimistic? Is a magical power helping us to find new humanity in our area? No, it is not. People and things are the same. It is just because our minds change. We are walking on the same road, but we are gasping for new air and voice into our lungs. The new air and sounds were brought to us by the winds from India. With the new air and sounds, we are no longer mentally tired; instead, we have more energy. In this tranquil environment, hundreds of trees are flowering, people are peaceful.

This paragraph is full of images referring to open space such as winds, air and trees and full of adjectives referring to peaceful states such as “peaceful,” “harmonious,” and “flowering.” All these suggest Vietnamese intellectuals’ endeavors to uphold the idea of a unique cultural tradition of the imagined Vietnamese nation. They attempted to promote in local public minds idealized cultural

traditions through the way of appreciating Tagore as an embodiment of Asian essence. This idealized traditional culture, as characterized, must include morality and spirituality as its essential, original aspects.

A question that must be addressed is why there was such an imagining of Vietnamese culture among local intellectuals. This imagining might have echoed contemporary colonial knowledge of an Indian civilizing mission in Southeast Asia. In British and French anthropological writings in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the presence of archetype Indian polity and religion is seen as the presence of “healthy race” and “nation-hood”. During this time, French intellectuals and prominent Hindu cultural nationalists had numerous “discoveries” of Indian heritages and other cultural values of the local people (Bayly 2000: 518-622; Edwards 2008: 40-1). Vietnamese intellectuals’ emphasis on the figure of Vietnamese culture as solely moral and spiritual must have received European and Asian leading intellectuals’ idea of such “nationhood” and “healthy race.”

However, more importantly, the spiritual orientations in presenting Tagore in colonial Vietnam were engaged with increasingly anti-modernity sentiments. In the late 1920s, these sentiments were once materialized in attempts of reviving Buddhism. 1929 was the time when Buddhist revival gained the most adherence and development (McHale 2008: 159-162). In the article “Chấn hưng Phật học” [Making Buddhism Prosperous] (*Đuốc Nhà Nam* 4/7/1929), Lê Trung Nghĩa, a French-educated prominent journalist and politician in Cochin China, recalled the Buddhism-related conversations between the Governor-General Pierre Pasquier (1928-34) and Tagore. At 6 pm on June 24, Tagore went to visit Governor General Pierre. During the meeting, Tagore expressed his special interest in the connections between poetry and religion and his love for the peaceful environment of Buddhist pagodas (*Đuốc Nhà Nam* 4/7/1929). In response, the Governor of Indochina shared with Tagore and members of the Indochina Constitutionalist Party that he had signed the decree to set up an institute for teaching and studying Buddhism and moral lessons in Cochin China (*L’ echo annamite* 18/7/1929). Noticeably, Vietnamese

intellectuals believed that the revival of Buddhism would counter growing modernization by protecting morals and spiritual values of Vietnamese people. Phạm Quỳnh (1892-1945), a noted essayist and public intellectual, editor of the *Nam Phong Journal*, guided his readers in traditional rituals, oral expressions and ideological philosophies. In other words, Phạm Quỳnh insisted on cultural nationalism (Tran, Ben Vu 2008: 68; Phạm Quỳnh 2007: 117-149; Brocheux and Hémerly: 2009: 228-229). While appreciating traditional values, Quỳnh criticized Western machines and technology. Quoting R. Tagore, Phạm Quỳnh insisted that scientific inventions were destroying social stability and tranquility (Phạm Quỳnh 1929: 160).

The representations of Tagore echoed earlier and continuing public criticism against colonial modernity, identifying it as the cause of moral degradation and economic bankruptcy of local peoples. Since the early twentieth century, the French colonizer speeded up modernizing processes to facilitate the exploitation of local natural resources and cheap labor. It conducted a colonial program of physical study, medication, and hygiene education that aimed at reformulating the colonized bodies in a way that was able to fulfill the labor needs of growing colonial industrialization (Cooper 2001: 145-9; Kelly 2000: 4-22). The colonial policy of modernizing the colony resulted in economic improvement (Cooper 2001: 29-30), raw-material production, and craft and farming-oriented nourishment (Kelly 2000: 14-16). Consequently, since the early twentieth century, Vietnamese intellectuals had seriously dealt with the very “strange, momentous question of modernization and Westernization” (Marr 2013: 5). Many Vietnamese intellectuals were aware of the moral, social destruction of Vietnam in the face of colonial modernization (Henchy 2005: 121-138). Profiting from colonization and appreciating the values of progress and democracy did not stop native intellectuals from developing the quest for “serious modernization,” a kind of modernization that help to eliminate colonial exploration and to overturn French domination for national independence (Marr 2013: 80-81; Duiker 1976: 104-105; Brocheux and Hémerly 2009: 292-298).

Specifically, in the 1910s, Vietnamese intellectuals nervously presented the moral, social destruction of traditional Vietnam in the

face of colonial modernization.<sup>6</sup> Radical anti-colonial movements in the mid-1910s arose as results of the French government's policies of intensifying colonial exploitation to financially and materially prepare for World War I (Trần Huy Liệu 1957 Volume 3: 78-130; Cooper 2001: 29-40). Images of wealthy foreigners associated with silk coins during this time formed a literary device for intellectuals to express their concerns about the moral destruction caused by colonial modernization. Pervasive stories and poems about interracial marriages between wealthy foreigners and native women in the mid-1910s indicate anti-colonialism in the form of anti-modernity. These literary works emphasize the political inappropriateness and physical unpleasantness of marrying rich foreigners, aiming to highlight the risk of losing the community's sovereignty caused by materialism and colonial modernization. This risk is presented in detail: driven by the rising greed for money brought about by modernity, Annamese women got married to foreigners at any price, thus, colonial modernization is dangerous in the way that it destroys the racial and ethnic uniqueness of the Annamese nation. The most telling example for Vietnamese intellectuals' anxiety about destructible power of colonial modernization is the Đặng Văn Chiêu (?-?)'s "singing rhyme" (vè) "Vè giải oan cho vợ chệt, vợ chà." (*Vè giải oan cho vợ chệt, vợ chà. Phía sau có thêm vè bão lụt năm Thìn* (Saigon: Imprimerie De L' Union, October 1915):

Cochinchina our area  
 Since the establishment  
*Displaying aspects of civilization*  
*Many words for criticism and suggestion*  
 ...  
 Being born in Annam  
 Why love "different country people" (ngoại quốc)  
 Dare to lose virginity  
 Just because of money (1-4; emphasis added)

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<sup>6</sup> The term "colonial modernization" refers to projects of modernizing colonies for the benefit of colonizers. Such understanding is borrowed from the theory of colonial modernization developed by Korean historians in the late 1980s (Read Weigel-Schwiedrzik 2014)

Or, Nguyễn Trung Tín's long Sino-Nom poem "Chuyện đồng tiền" ("Story of Money", 1918) criticizes contemporary money-driven Vietnamese society, in which humans' bodies and souls are sacrificed for business exchanges and money accumulation. The presence of modernity is seen to have contaminated Vietnamese blood:

Nào người cháu đời con dòng  
Tây đen lấm chùi đem lòng thân yêu  
Chỉ yêu vì nổi tiền nhiều  
Thấy đồng bạc trắng quyết liều môi son  
[Many of those who were born to noble families  
Become friendly with black Westerners  
Just because they love having excessive money  
Seeing white silver coins, they were determined  
To [sacrifice] their red lips (Đoàn Thị Mai Hương 2002)

These poems definitely express Vietnamese intellectuals' awareness about the economic exploitation of French colonizers in its modernizing mission; the civilizing force is seen to have broken social norms, national and family unity, and racial purity. Therefore, since the first two decades of the twentieth century, Vietnamese intellectuals, being aware of the danger of "unserious" concepts of colonial modernization, attempted to hold onto sorts of traditional morals and cultures to maintain the sovereignty of their supposedly cohesive community of locals (Phạm Cao Dương 1966: 169-170; Murray 1980: 101; Kelly 2000: 11-13). The way of presenting Tagore as a savior of religious, cultural, and moral values ostensibly reflects such anti-modernity sentiments, which embody Vietnamese nationalism. The vision of national cohesion and autonomy, as recorded by many scholars, is an endless demand of the local population (Roberts 1963: 475-6; Marr 1983: 119-120; Brocheux and Hemery 2009: 293).

### III. Presentation of Tagore and Anti-Capitalism

The presentation of Tagore also embodies a swift to radical nationalism in colonial Vietnam in the 1920s. Vietnamese



intellectuals interpreted Tagore's talks about pacifism and humanism as presenting his bourgeois ideology, a stance that kept him away from sympathizing with the poor. Vietnamese intellectuals criticized it as an ideology exclusively for rich people, whose lives were filled with material sufficiency. In an article "Rabindranath Tagore à Saigon" published in the liberal newspaper *L'echo annamite* (June 22, 1929), Nguyễn Phan Long undermined Tagore's ideas of pacifism; Tagore's character and career appeared in sarcasm and irony:

We burned with the desire to see a great hero... Alas! Our hope was disappointed... You [Tagore] are a pacifist. You must have had more than the courage of heroism, as [you] dare to be pacifist even in the context that you are a citizen of a conquered country!... <sup>7</sup>

This article attacks Tagore in the detail that his speeches of optimistic pacifism were too immature and that the illusion and enthusiasm in Tagore's words would lead to the edge of collapse. The author saw these ideologies suitable only to the rich and powerful, those who did not have to be concerned with the daily needs for money and food; the voice of Tagore about pacifism and universalism was seen to be too foreign to material conditions and the minds of contemporary Vietnamese peasants.

Journalists of *Thần Chung* expressed such class-oriented views about Tagore's ideology in more vivid expressions: Tagore's thought of "peace" and "charity" was not feasible for the people of Vietnam who were living in fields of war; and the reception of Tagore was exclusively for "the first class, the second class." The article "Cái ý nghĩa cuộc tiếp rước ông Tagore mới rồi" [The Meaning of the Current Reception of Tagore], June 26, 1929) noted that Vietnamese compatriots, especially peasants, who were miserable and dying for a great hero to come to provide them with tools to fulfill their hunger. The article develops in a warning tone that such hope was vague and utopian because Tagore was not Jesus Christ; and that Tagore loved concepts about human beings, peace, and charity; he did not care about the specific material conditions of the poor

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<sup>7</sup> This is my translation from French to English.

human beings in Vietnamese land: “He just loves our rivers, our mountains, our winds and our moon; his words have nothing to do with the bitter injustice of life.” For the local peasants, universal objects and poems were not their urgent concern; instead, the way of solving their material insufficiency mattered to the Vietnamese peasants and workers the most. Another article, “Nói về Tagore” [About Tagore] in *Thần Chung* (June 27, 1929) contended that the most critical issue for the Vietnamese mass was neither religion nor spirituality, but hunger and slavery; meanwhile, Tagore completely ignored the mass’ needs because his stomach was full. It stated, while the local Vietnamese people were living a turbulent time that brought them constant trouble, hopelessness, and discontentedness, ridiculously Tagore led a religious life and “brought his Ganga to our land to teach us to love world peace.” The article concluded with a critique that the way Tagore kept appreciating spiritual and universal values was his ignorance and indifference towards “our people” – the lower class; he laughed at “our crying” (*Thần Chung* June 25, 1929)

According to the third article, “Chung quanh cuộc tiếp rước ông Tagore: Tấm lòng bác ái và hòa bình của tiên sinh” (Nguyễn Văn Bá), published in *Thần Chung* (28 June 1929), only high-class people like Tagore had enough leisure time to think of tradition and poetry; Tagore was excellent in speaking of peace rather than offering a practical tool for the mass to reach it. Tagore was described as “talented in phrasing his thoughts in a beautiful way” but “his philosophy of ‘peace and charity’ was so luxurious that it was for few elite people.” The article provokes a regret that the Vietnamese audience should have not welcomed Tagore as a revolutionist or a nationalist because his ideology is filled with abstract and unrealistic objects such as clouds and sounds of music and song. It is possible to see in all these appreciations of Tagore an urgent call for a care of the common people’s material needs and their status of being colonized. It is possible to find a similar critique of Tagore in contemporary international newspapers. Take George Lukács’s criticism published in 1922 as one example. Lukacs called Tagore a “petty bourgeois,” someone who “assess[es] wisdom ‘in itself’ in the vacuum of pure theory (and within the walls of an

elegant salon)” and who did not/cannot speak “about the most burning contemporary questions” (Lukács 1922: 3).

Those who had a class struggle-oriented nationalist perspective critiqued Tagore’s bourgeois lifestyle. In “Rabindranath Tagore ghé viếng tòa báo Phụ nữ tân văn” [Tagore visits the editorial office of *Phụ nữ tân văn* newspaper], Nguyễn Đức Nhuận told readers that he had expected Tagore to be as dark as other Indians he met, but as it turned out, he had “a white and smooth skin, high nose, broad forehead… his hands are elegant and noble, his fingers are white and round; *he was born from a high-class family*; every day he composes poetry and plays music” (emphasis added).<sup>8</sup> Descriptions about Tagore’s stay in Saigon also highlighted his way of living above common people’s standard. For example, the article “Nhà thi sĩ Tagore đã đến Saigon” [Poet Tagore Reached Saigon] in *Thần Chung* (June 22) detailed Tagore’s lunch in the first-class lounge on the ship before landing in Saigon. In the June 25 piece “Ba ngày thi sĩ R. Tagore ở Saigon” [Tagore’s three days in Saigon], *Đuốc Nhà Nam* provided its readers with information about accommodations, transportation and food for Tagore while in Saigon. Tagore lived in a big villa; he was provided two seven-seat cars; and he attended the Champaign party organized in his staying place. The second part of “Ba ngày thi sĩ R. Tagore ở Saigon” (June 27, 1929), which was about Tagore’s second day in Saigon, named the party in Nguyễn Văn Cù’s printing company as a Champagne party.

Particularly, the detail about Champaign appeared concurrently in descriptions about Tagore, which suggests Vietnamese intellectuals’ anxiety in identifying the social class of Tagore. Patriotic Vietnamese intellectuals had a tradition of associating luxurious French products with the colonial regime; for example, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822-1888) attacked French colonialism in the name of boycotting French products such as “xà phòng” (soap) and “rượu ngọt” (champagne) (Đoàn Lê Giang 2001: 87; Vũ Tiến Quỳnh 2000: 312). This traditional association was still in place in 1929 when Vietnamese nationalists fervently criticized Rabindranath Tagore’s consumption of champagne during his visit to Saigon.

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<sup>8</sup> 21 *Phụ nữ tân văn*, July 4, 1929.

Images of Tagore with champagne parties formed the main cause of public disappointment and even hatred among local people, particularly among leaders of the Indochinese Labor Party (1926-1929), the party which attempted to “work for the general well-being of the workers, for the improvement of labor techniques and for the moral and material uplifting of the country” (quoted by Peycam 2015: 204). These negative sentiments were echoed in last words of Tagore at the port before he left Saigon:

The people of the Labor Party blamed me that I was favor of luxuries and ignorant of poverty and that I stayed in the house of a capitalist (Của) and did not come to those of poor people. It is an unfair judgment. I came to Cúa’s house drinking a glass of champagne; they [Indochinese Labor Party’s representatives] also came there drinking champagne. While they could come there, so why could I not? (*Đuốc nhà nam* July 2, 1929)

These sentences in fact repeated the Labor Party leaders’ accusations of Tagore as belonging to the bourgeoisie class, enemy of the working class. This assumed identity was more obvious, as from Labor Party members’ perspectives, in the fact that Tagore attempted to stay away from the mass people while consciously embracing himself with the comfort of luxurious conditions. As narrated, Huỳnh Phúc Yên, leader of the Indochinese Labor Party, loudly blamed Tagore for not having given a speech to the “Annamite peasants” at the Theatre Thành Xương as he had promised. Tagore reacted that, as highlighted, he did not want to go to the theater; if people wanted to listen to him, then they should have come to his hotel. These details highlight the public belief that Tagore was a bourgeoisie, target of rising class struggle-nationalist sentiments. Obviously, resentments about Tagore’s supposed ignorance of the low-class people reflect the Labor Party’s advocacy of the welfare of the Vietnamese proletariat - an attempt that made it be the first necessary step in “the foundation of a real democracy in Vietnam” (Peycam 2015: 205).

The public resentment towards Tagore as the presence of foreign capitalists is the most explicit in sentences by Lê Thành Lư, another leader of the Labor Party, who “found himself as member

of the working class” and who “emerged himself in the ideas of international Marxism” (Paycam 2015: 206) when he reacted to Tagore’s presumably ignorance to the mass: “You should have looked at the people who came to this land to suck the blood [of annamites] … you should have shown gratitude to Annamite [labor], who offered you a great reception” (*Đuốc Nhà Nam*, July 2, 1929) Here, Tagore was identified as a blood sucking being, metaphor of capitalists as widely used by contemporary Marxist writers (Pham 2021: 20-50). The use of metaphors of bloodsucking beings in Vietnamese literature likely echoed the widespread view about the “vampiric nature” of capitalists and particularly colonial capitalists who crossed national borders for economic exploitation in Western literature since the early eighteenth century as Aimé Césaire (1955) once described. Particularly, the image of vampire is common in writings of Marxist theoreticians such as Frederick Engels and Karl Marx; particularly Karl Marx compares that French bourgeoisie who exploits labor of peasants and workers is like vampires whose living depends on blood of other beings (Neocleous 2003: 669-684; Melton 1999: 543; Robinson 107-108). Ho Chi Minh, in his Marxist analysis of French colonization, *Le Procès de la colonisation française*, published serially in France from 1921 to 1925, also describes that the French capitalists gain their wealth through blood and sweat of the colonized population. In this essay, he compares colonialism with a leech with two suctions: one sucks blood of workers in metropolises and the other sucks blood of workers in colonies. Copies of this pamphlet, as Charles B. McLane (1966) predicted, might have reached colonial Vietnam simultaneously, become an authoritative text of Vietnamese nationalists and stimulated public interest in Marxism (109). Although other bloodsucking creatures appeared previously - e.g. the image of lice in the reformist Phan Chau Trinh’s writings (Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism* 169-170) -- in local scholar’s subtle critiques on French colonization, the association of bloodsucking creatures with colonial capitalism is apparently the most obvious in Vietnamese writing since 1920s during which materials of Marxism were increasingly circulated (Duiker 1976: 191-194; Marr 1981: 358-360; Nguyễn Công Khanh 2006 : 53-110).

The presentation of Tagore in colonial Vietnam potentially might have displayed what Ho Tam Hue Tai defined in her book *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (1996), as the emergence of radicalism, a current of reaction to colonial rule among Vietnamese intellectuals that was not based on one specific political ideology, but rather a “political mood” (1) or “a form of cultural politics” (6) or the yearning for a new form of political expressions during the years of 1920s. But undeniably, the presentation of Tagore, as seen in the uses of the “bloodsucking” creature metaphor and class-struggle-related terms and expressions, also indicates the dynamic of anti-colonial thoughts in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. That representation of Tagore demonstrated a strong Marxism based-nationalism in the late 1920s of Vietnam, given that the presentation largely provoked in public minds a form of anti-colonialism that were based on cultural debates (bourgeois lifestyle or proletarian lifestyle; spiritualism or materialism; thinking or physical action). During this time radical Vietnamese youth were passionate about Tagore and Gandhi as well as about Lenin and Sun Yat-sen; they were also attracted by Western and Russian revolutionaries (Brocheux and Hemery 2009: 307). The radical reaction to Tagore in colonial Vietnam was also somehow similar to that in Chinese presentations of Tagore during his visit to China in 1924. When he visited China in April 1924, he encouraged young Chinese to steer clear of modern technology, material comforts, money, and the capitalist ethos in general; instead, they should preserve the so-called Eastern spiritual civilization, the combined heritage of India and China, which is essential for “healing a world despoiled by the bombs, commodity culture and predatory conduct of Western nation-states” (Tsui 2013). Tagore was fervently criticized for such a spirituality-favored view, given that Chinese youth were attracted to militant revolutionary politics in the context that in early 1924, Sun Yat-sen’s National Party allied with the Chinese Communist Party. Chinese intellectuals were at the time in favor of ideas about the emancipation of workers and peasants from economic oppression and about some revolution that could national and class struggle against Western imperialism and capitalism. Thus, Tagore’s call for Oriental wisdom was seen as detrimental to the national cause (Tsui 2013; Chatterjee 2014: 28-35; Chattopadhyay

1991: 78-83; Chatterjee 2011: 271-283). And as mentioned above, not long before the visit of Tagore, in 1927, Bùi Quang Chiêu and Dương Văn Giáo attempted to establish connections with the Chinese Communist Party-allied National Party.

In the late 1920s and the early 1930s, during the time of Depression and "the period of a high-level fight" (thời kì cao trào tranh đấu) with farmers' red Soviet upheaval, with workers' protests, and with the foundation of the Indochina Communist Party (Trần Huy Liệu 40, 56), the idea of class struggle in Marxist-Leninist doctrine had a deeper impact on Vietnamese intellectuals' ideology. And as detailed by Brocheux and Hemery and Peycam, young Vietnamese intelligentsia's interest in Marxism became apparent when radical periodicals reprinted many articles from Europe's revolutionary press during the 1920s. *Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels was published in an installment series in 1926 in *La cloche fêlée*, a radical newspaper that the French colonial administration had to work hard to prevent its dissemination. Many articles in this journal presented a Marxist perspective of the political situation (Peycam 2014: 188-190; Brocheux and Hemery 2009: 311-314). Thus, the presence of Tagore in Vietnam must have been also taken by Vietnamese intellectuals to comment on the social situation of colonial Vietnam from Marxist terms. The existence of different political perspectives imbued in the representations of Tagore in colonial Vietnam indicates the dynamic of anti-colonialism in the years of 1920s, during which Vietnamese intellectuals appear to have examined and experimented on different political thoughts in prolonging attempts of reacting against the French colonial rule.

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Received: Nov. 19, 2020; Reviewed: July 27, 2022; Accepted: Jan. 12, 2023