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News from the Paddy Fields: Narratives of Indochinese Workers in Wartime France

Abstract:

In 1939/40 the French government recruited 20 000 men from its Indochinese colonies to work in labouring roles in mainland France. These workers were used as a propaganda tool by the Vichy authorities because of their pivotal role in launching rice production in France. Despite such wartime depictions, these men's very presence in Occupied France, the roles they played and their interactions with local communities have largely been overlooked or forgotten over the last seventy years. This article examines two autobiographical narratives by such Indochinese workers, comparing and contrasting them with two recent documentaries containing interviews with these workers and their descendants. How have these written and audio-visual narratives sought to uncover this hidden wartime world and to construct a more multicultural history of wartime France?

Keywords : Commemoration; Indochina; Conscripted labourers; World War Two; Memoirs; Memory transmission

It is estimated that approximately 20 000 male colonial subjects were recruited, voluntarily or by force, by the French colonial administration in the Autumn/ Winter of 1939 and the Spring of 1940 in the provinces of Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchine (French Indochina). This was in addition to 15 000 tirailleurs annamites (indigenous Indochinese soldiers) who were already serving in the French army. It was envisaged that these men would be brought to France to work in manual labouring tasks and in factories to replace the French men who had been conscripted. This recruitment echoed the use of Indochinese workers during the First World War, when between 90 000 (Tran-Nu, 1989, 7) and 100 000 men had worked behind the front

lines of the trenches and in munitions factories (Rives, 2004, 12). French colonial propaganda had long deemed Indochinese populations largely unsuitable for frontline fighting because of their supposedly non-aggressive nature and because of worries surrounding their loyalty to their commanding officers following a poisoning incident in Hanoi in 1908 and the Yen Bay revolt of 1930.¹ Therefore the French colonial authorities focused their efforts on recruiting manual labours rather than additional soldiers in 1939. Approximately 14 200 Indochinese workers spent the years of the Second World War in France,² working as indentured labourers for the Vichy government (Daum, 2014, 156). Severe food shortages caused by German requisitioning, a lack of French men to work in agriculture and the inability to import food from the Empire, led Vichy official Henri Maux to suggest in 1941 that the Indochinese workers could establish rice paddies in the Camargue. These workers also occupied other agricultural and manufacturing roles.

This article examines two autobiographies written by such Indochinese workers, *Itinéraire d'un petit mandarin Juin 1940* by Hũu Tho Lê and *Saïgon-Marseille aller simple – Un fils de mandarin dans les camps de travailleurs en France* by Nguyen Van Thanh³ and two documentaries containing interviews with these workers, *Công Binh, une longue nuit indochinoise*, (Lê, 2012) and *Les hommes des trois ky* (Lê-Liêu, 2009).⁴ All were released post 1995, following a near fifty year period of silence surrounding this men's participation in the French war effort, from both outside and within this group.

This special issue is entitled 'Hidden words, hidden worlds: everyday life and narrative sources (France 1939-1945)'. However, images of these Indochinese workers were far from hidden from the French public during the Occupation. Two short propaganda films showing the workers planting the rice crop were made by France Actualités in October 1942 and November 1943.⁵ Equally these men were featured in the *Revue d'Arles* and in other Vichy sponsored publications, especially because of the visit of Mme Pétain, herself an Arlesienne,

to receive the first rice harvest in her husband's name.⁶ It is for this reason that these workers have become linked with the story of rice production, although the vast majority of these men actually worked in factories or other forms of agricultural labour.

More generally, the French Empire played a central role in Vichy propaganda throughout the war, as Ruth Ginio has documented,

Pétain regarded the Empire as his most precious diplomatic card. It gave Vichy France exactly what it most lacked: huge tracks of territory, manpower, resources and prestige...The Empire was expected to give France a respectable status in that [post-war] world, notwithstanding its inferior position resulting from defeat. (Ginio, 2000, 293)

Propaganda films, such as those depicting the Indochinese workers, which portray the supposedly willing colonial workforce working for the good of the *mère patrie* were especially useful for the Vichy administration, a tangible example of continuing French supremacy and its civilising mission despite foreign occupation of the French nation.

Instead it was in the post-war years that the story of these men disappeared from French and Vietnamese public consciousness for a variety of reasons.⁷ The beginning of the *Guerre d'Indochine* in 1946 meant that many of these workers who remained in France awaiting repatriation were viewed with suspicion, classed as being possible foreign communist agents and held in camps in Southern France so that they could be better supervised. Therefore there was no longer any media coverage of their cause and their internment severely limited their means of expression. In post-independence Vietnam, the workers who had returned home, hid this period of their past from others out of fear that they would be branded as Western sympathisers and agents and therefore endanger their own and their children's chances of gaining a government job. Many men were also involved in months or years of armed struggle

during the 1950s and 1960s, which again took them away from their families, but which was then easier to discuss because it fitted a more glorious national narrative.

Equally there was a non-transmission of memory within the families that these Indochinese workers established with French women in France. Such non-transmission is common to immigrant families from former colonies, born partly from a sentiment of having chosen the wrong side (that of the colonial master) or the inability or unwillingness of the first generation to return home to the newly independent homeland. (Sayad, 1991) It is also due to the wishes of the first generation not to hinder the integration or social ascension of their children born in France of French mothers, “J’avoue avoir secrètement souhaité me faire connaître à mes enfants...Reflexions faites, j’ai abandonné cette idée...Je n’apporte rien de valable à leur existence” laments one of the authors, Van Trinh (2012, 11). Several associations have been created since 2000 by the children of such workers in an attempt to finally discover the truth about their father’s past, often after they have died.⁸

The documentary, *Riz Amer* (Lewkowicz, 2015)⁹ testifies to the non-recognition, even voluntary denial of the existence of these men and their role in the rice industry, amongst certain sectors of the local population in the Camargue. Two men, part of local rice growing families, minimise (“ils sont restés très peu de temps... de toute façon le riz ils ne le connaissaient pas...avant 44 il n’y avait pas de riz en Camargue” (Lewkowicz, 2015, 36.00)) the existence and important role of large numbers of Indochinese workers in the area, even when they are confronted with visual evidence in the form of photographs and archival footage. “Ça (le film) a été pris en Indochine pas en Camargue...Même les vaches, ça n’a rien à voir avec ce que nous avons à l’époque...C’est du montage”(Lewkowicz, 2015, 36.20 to 39.59). Their desperation to stick to their story even leads one of the men to claim that the film must have been shot in Italy and that maybe the wartime Italian government had recruited Indochinese workers. The contemporary annual celebration of rice (La Feria du riz) held in

Arles in September presents the rice industry in the Camargue as a Spanish import and therefore celebrates multiple aspects of Spanish culture (bull-fighting, flamenco and traditional food) at this event. To admit instead that the rice industry was based on indentured labour from a former French colony, organised by the collaborationist Vichy government, is a far less glorious and picturesque image to sell to tourists.

Research undertaken for the Frame Project (www.frame.leeds.ac.uk), which has created a database of fictional depictions of France during World War Two, has demonstrated that depictions of the role played by colonial populations in France's war effort or of the wartime history of the French Empire do exist (approximately 120 texts/films), but that this theme has for decades been overlooked in cultural criticism. The project Ego1939-1945 (<http://www.ego.1939-1945.crhq.cnrs.fr/>) which aims to construct a database of all non-fictional sources about the Occupation, to date only includes L  s narrative, under the keyword – Travail (obligatoire ou volontaire). While the entry on Empire colonial fran  ais in this database only includes details of works written by French colonial administrators. Equally, historical studies into the wartime role of these men, and other colonial troops and workers have been championed by journals into migrant history or by organisations such as the Mus  e histoire de l'immigration.¹⁰ They have yet to enter the canonical historical or cultural texts about the period. Therefore it is accurate to speak of 'Hidden Worlds and Hidden Words' in a postwar context.

Written narratives: privilege, admiration and criticism.

The two autobiographies written by these former Indochinese indentured labourers were both published post 1995. This period witnessed a heightened interest in the history of France's colonial empire and its legacy in contemporary France, with the resurgences of

debates surrounding the use of torture and rape by the French Army during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) and the tabling of a law in 2005 meant to “reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer”.¹¹ Indeed Lam Lê, the director of a documentary about these workers entitled *Công Binh*, directly references “cette loi ingrate” (Lê, interview on the DVD) as one of his motivations for making his documentary. Such years were also marked by the increasing age of these Indochinese workers and therefore a sense that they had to write their memoirs before it was too late, as the authors were, by then, in their late eighties.

Both of the texts were written by men who had received a form of secondary education in Vietnam before leaving for France and who therefore occupied better paid and more prestigious roles within the Indochinese workforce (Interpreter, Foreman). They also came from families with a tradition of working with and for the French colonial masters, a fact that is reflected in these works' titles (*Un fils de mandarin dans les camps de travailleurs en France* (Van Tranh), *Itinéraire d'un petit mandarin* (Lê)), which make reference to their status as “un fils de mandarin”, the title given to Indochinese colonial civil servants. This necessarily influenced the perspectives and representations of this period in their works. While the authors do not hesitate to criticise the behaviour of French colonial officers that commanded them, they also devote a great deal of space to praise of French culture, demonstrating the extent to which they have absorbed the discourse of French cultural superiority,

Je jette un dernier coup d'œil sur la silhouette imposante du Château d'Amboise...je suis ébloui par la révélation d'un art architectural inconnu dans notre culture...il n'existe pas de vestiges et des monuments importants dans notre pays. Les Vietnamiens ne sont pas des bâtisseurs. (Lê, 1997, 37).

Both authors are aware of the privileges of their education, which allowed them to document their experiences, but which also separated them intellectually and socially from their

compatriots during the war years, “Si je vous raconte aujourd’hui cette histoire, c’est pour rendre hommage aux Travailleurs Indochinois...je me devais de consacrer quelques moments à ceux qui ont été mes amis”. (Lê, 1997, 10). The two authors never refer to themselves as travailleurs. The extremely limited levels of literacy found generally amongst this labour force both at the time they left the Indochinese territories and also during their subsequent working life in France, where they occupied mainly manual labour roles, limited the possible field of authors. It is partly for this reason that the two documentaries, to be analysed later in this article, *Công Binh, une longue nuit indochinoise*, Lê, 2012 and *Les hommes de trois ky* (Lê-Liêu, 2009), have particular importance, as through their interviews with these Indochinese workers, they provide a vital platform for a more diverse socio-economic range of these men’s testimonies.

There are several themes that appear repeatedly in both the written and the audio-visual narratives. The most important of these is the contact between the workers and the French population. The camp officials, often members of the colonial administration or former officers of the French colonial army are depicted as tyrants, who eased the war privations for themselves and their families by stealing the Indochinese workers’ food, clothing and fuel. The traditional coloniser-colonised hierarchy was enforced at all times and colonial discourse on France’s mission civilisatrice abound. In contrast the Indochinese workers are shown to have enjoyed cordial and even extremely friendly relations with the people in the nearby towns or villages to the camps, “la cohabitation de nos compatriots avec le peuple français durant six ans se passe plutôt correctement, voire amicalement” (Lê, 1997, 47). Because they had only previously experienced the strict racial hierarchy in Indochina, such easy contact was a surprise to them, “Les Français, sur le quai (à Marseille) nous accueillait avec chaleur, nous tendaient la main...ils souriaient et nous parlaient gentiment. Nous étions étonnés de les voir se comporter ainsi avec nous”. (Van Thanh, 2012, 109). In more rural areas of France, the influence of

colonial propaganda produced for the 1931 colonial exhibition and earlier human zoos, as well as in popular literature of the period about the supposedly cannibalistic nature of colonial populations, was very much in evidence. In a small village in the Dordogne, where the Indochinese workers are sent in October 1941 for the chestnut harvest, the local populations were initially frightened of these men. So the local schoolmaster organised a basketball match between local children and “les amis d’outre-mer”. With humour the author recounts how “on oublia les sauvages mangeurs d’enfants” (Van Thanh, 2012, 137) and the workers were subsequently invited to eat in locals’ homes.

This image of cordial relations is re-enforced with numerous personal photographs of the authors with French friends and girlfriends and a touching account of the courtship between Lê and his French schoolmistress girlfriend Madeleine, who he married after the war. The access to personal photographic equipment, for none of these images were taken in a staged, studio setting, re-enforces the privileged status, both financial and administrative, that these authors enjoyed in comparison to their compatriots. However it further skews the representations of the population presented in the written narratives, for all we see are the images of the most well-dressed and well-fed members of this population.

The German occupier is largely absent from both the written narratives. Lê Hiu Tho was arrested by the Gestapo and the French police held in St Anne’s prison in Avignon for several weeks in the February of 1944, having been suspected of taking part in Resistance activities, because a French policeman claims that an Annamite¹² had been spotted during an act of train sabotage. Lê claims that he even managed to avoid torture at the hands of the Gestapo because the German officer was so appalled by the stories that Lê told about the horrors of French colonialism in Indochina. So it is suggested that greater crimes were committed in the name of Imperialism than in the name of National Socialism. Instead it is the French para-military Milice that receive the greatest criticism from the author, “Par malchance,

ma délivrance est retardée de plusieurs semaines par la vindicte et le zèle de la Milice française” (Lê, 1997, 5). Not only do the accounts not draw upon the stereotypical images of a cruel and sadistic German, they also nuance the depiction of the German army as a monolithic entity. For both narratives choose instead to focus on other marginalised populations, those serving against their will in the German Army. There are detailed descriptions of soldiers from Alsace and Russia, who the Indochinese workers sympathised with, feeling that there were numerous similarities in the conditions of recruitment and wartime service between themselves and these other groups, “ils (les Alsaciens) détestaient la guerre et avaient hâte de retrouver leur famille, comme nous”. (Van Trinh, 2012, 174).¹³

The written narratives are brutally honest about the terrible physical and mental toll that the war years, especially the poor housing, food and working conditions, took on the Indochinese workers. There are numerous tales of alcoholism, tuberculous and mental breakdown. The fear of being sent to either the specialist Indochinese hospital of Le Dantec, near Marseille, from which many were never to return because of its poor sanitary conditions or the Section de Redressement in Sorgues, a prison for these workers, is documented in detail. However, the authors’ privileged educational and social status saved them from the worst of these conditions, so there are no first hand descriptions of such establishments.

Audio-visual narratives: inscribing the workers’ stories in a transnational context

While the written narratives highlight individual testimonies and viewpoints, the two documentaries give a more varied narrative, through their in-depth interviews with numerous former indentured Indochinese workers; *Công Binh, une longue nuit indochinoise*, (Lê, 2012) and *Les hommes des trois ky* (Lê-Liêu, 2009). *Công Binh* is the Vietnamese name given to these group of workers in 1939.

The role of documentary films in creating an important place for a migrant community in the collective memory of a society, was cemented with the release of *Mémoires d'immigrés* (Benguigui, 1997). This documentary was one of the first to interview first generation immigrants (in this context, from the Maghreb), attempting to seek out, often for the first time, their personal stories of migration, life as an immigrant in France and their relationships with their mainly French born children. Benguigui drew upon her own family's history, especially the culture of silence surround the family's history of migration. Like Benguigui's film, both *Công-binh* and *Les hommes des trois ky* interview men in their everyday environment, both within and outside the home. The Vietnamese landscape is also given great prominence in both documentaries through the repetition of images of lush green paddy fields. This serves as a means of (re)placing this part of these men's stories in a Vietnamese as well as French narrative.

Công Binh also seeks to reconnect these men's stories with their Indochinese origins through the use of the puppets of *Troupe Nationale des Marionnettes sur Eau du Viêt Nam* (Hanoi). The fictionalised scenes enacted by these puppets show what was happening at home while the men were away in France, especially the collaboration between the French and the Japanese occupiers, another little told aspect of France's wartime history. Lê claims to have initially wished to make a fictional film, but was worried that "on ne m'aurait pas cru" (Lê interview on DVD bonus), such is the hidden nature of this story. Instead he has used fictionalised narrative sequences in order to provide a 360 degree depiction of the war years. Lê claims that his status as a Vietnamese citizen, who now lives abroad (a *Viêt Kiêu*), gives him a privileged position, allowing him to interview these men in their native language, but without them feeling that he represents one side or another.¹⁴

While the written narratives can all be said to have been tempered by the experiences of postwar life spent in France, with a French wife and family, the interviewees of the audio-

visual narratives are virtually all men who returned to Indochina in the later 1940s. These testimonies focus to a much greater extent on the brutality of the conscription process, the physical threats to their families proffered by the French administration and the attempts to take the place of a married brother, to ease the suffering of their extended family. They then move on to detail the hardships of the sea voyage and the terrible housing and sanitary conditions that they faced on their arrival in France. There are few details of these men's working or personal lives in France during the Occupation, instead the narrative restarts at the Liberation of Southern France in the Summer and Autumn of 1944. The films analyse the first political demands made by the Indochinese workers at their conference in Avignon in November 1944, as well as the rise of nationalist and pro-Independence movements that took place in the transit camps in which thousands of the workers were held until 1949. A concentrated focus on both their personal and collective demands for independence for their native Indochinese territories allows the interviewees to provide a version of events that conforms to the post-independence Vietnamese national narrative, therefore protecting themselves and their families. It allows them to tell a more personally valorising testimony that emphasises their political awakening and collective struggle. Such testimonies also serve to highlight the arbitrary nature of accepted dates for major events such as wars. While the war official ended on the 8 May 1945, many of these men's wartime service only came to an end nearly four years later where they were finally repatriated to Indochina.

Lê's documentary also seeks to insert these men's stories into wider narrative of exploitation of colonial populations by the French state. The granddaughter of an Indochinese worker reads excerpts, throughout the film, from Sartre's preface to Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961) and Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950). Equally comparisons are made with the North and West African *tirailleurs* and the revaluation of their pensions, following Rachid Bouchareb's 2006 film *Indigènes*.¹⁵ Indeed the audio-visual narratives

concentrate to a far greater extent than their written counterparts on the subject of financial repatriations and pensions for their time in France during the Occupation. Past and present Vietnamese governments since 1979 have refused to raise the issue with successive French governments. The current French government claims that the men were given indemnity payments on their departure from France in the 1940s, a fact which the film's interviewees firmly refute.¹⁶

Both documentaries do not give details of men's identity until the end of the film when they are revealed through a slideshow of the men's photographs taken in the manner of military identity papers (frontal and profile shots), complete with their army registration number and their age. This can be read as an attempt to remember the pseudo-military nature of their story as well as to create a united and collective history for this group and therefore honour the stories of those who are not long able to tell their own story, out of fear or because of they have died before such documentaries were made.

The written and audio-visual narratives both include large amounts of archival material, photographs, identity cards, archival footage (in the form of photographs or documentary stills in the written narratives). This can be interpreted as an attempt to construct a form of parallel archives for this population. In *Indochine de Provence – le silence de la rizière*, the archivist Eve Duperray, relates the rarity of official archival traces of this population in local archives, “le dépouillement des Archives départementales de Vaucluse s’est révélé décevant, puisqu’aucun document n’a été conservé, à l’exception de quelques courriers...pour louer les ONS (ouvriers non spécialisés) aux forces d’occupation allemandes”. (Duperray, 2012, 34). The desire to create such parallel archives is also evident in the construction of websites to tell the story of these Indochinese workers by members of the second generation. Joël Pham, the webmaster of <http://travailleurs-indochinois.org/> describes his site as “lieu virtuel de la mémoire” (Pham in Duperray, 2012, 40). He is currently working on an online memorial to the

Linh-Tho (soldier-workers in Vietnamese) that aims to have basic biographical details for the 19 362 Indochinese workers that left in 1939-40. The hosting of such a memorial on a website allows for it to be consulted both in France and Vietnam. Therefore giving it greater transnational resonance than that which might be available to either the written or audio-visual narratives, which are expensive and difficult to access in Vietnam.

Creating des lieux de mémoires

In addition to written and audio-visual traces of the Indochinese workers' stories, there now exists tangible traces of their story in the French landscape. The period post 2013 has witnessed a series of journées de souvenir in the towns of Southern France which housed camps for these Indochinese workers during World War Two (Saint-Chamas, Miramas and Sorgues). A commemorative sculpture to the Indochinese workers in the rice industry was inaugurated in Salin de Giraud on the 5 October 2014, organised by the association MOI or Mémorial pour les Ouvriers Indochinois, a name which is a play on words on the title given to the Indochinese workers during the war (Main d'œuvre immigrée). A plaque was also placed on the Monument du souvenir indochinois, a war memorial, in Toulouse in November 2015. Although these events were attended by local government officials and elected councillors, the French Republic has yet to organise any kind of national act of remembrance for these Indochinese workers. Therefore it is these written and audio-visual narratives that will function as a lasting memorial to the, as yet little known, role played by these Indochinese colonial workers during the period of the Occupation. These narratives will also serve to provide a more detailed and multicultural image of the Occupation, to uncover hidden worlds, worlds connected to France's larger imperial history and its contemporary post-colonial legacy.

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¹ <http://www.seriefreresdarmes.com/#!asiatiques-pacifique/c1xgt>, consulted 15/2/2016

² The rest of the workers were not transported to France in time or were repatriated to Indochina following the Armistice of 1940. Such repatriations were halted because of a deterioration in relations between the French and the British, which made such sea journeys difficult and dangerous. Pierre Daum, *Immigrés de force*, 67-8.

³ One of these autobiographies was self-published (Thieu Van Muu, *Un enfant loin de son pays*). The author died in July 2015, a few months before this article was written and it has proved impossible to locate a copy of this work.

⁴ I have not been able to find the meaning of the word *ky*, as used in the title of this documentary. I would be very grateful to receive information on this subject.

⁵ "Récolte du riz en Camargue" du 23 octobre 1942 et "Riziculture" du 5 novembre 1943, *France Actualités*.

⁶ "La récolte de riz en Camargue", *La revue d'Arles*, 14, Octobre/Novembre 1942.

⁷ Such post-war national amnesia is common to representations of the role of numerous colonial populations during World War Two. See Sutherland, "Trois continents, une guerre, un empire: Francophone Narratives of War and 'Occupation in the French Empire'", *French Cultural Studies*, 22(3), 2011, 187-196.

⁸ <http://www.travailleurs-indochinois.org/>, consulted 16/02/2016.

⁹ The documentary, *Riz Amer - Les Indochinois en Camargue (1939-1952)* is not analysed in depth in this article as it does not include any first hand testimonies from the requisitioned Indochinese workers. Instead it concentrates upon the recollections of locals in the Camargue, the daughter of the Vichy official Henri Maux, as well as several of the descendants of the Indochinese workers trying to piece together their family history.

¹⁰ <http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/des-dossiers-thematiques-sur-l-histoire-de-l-immigration/les-travailleurs-indochinois-en-france-pendant-la-seconde-guerre-mondiale> - consulted 16/05/2016.

¹¹ La loi française n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés. It was the highly contested article 4 that original mentioned the positive role of French colonisation.

¹² General term meant to describe the inhabitants of the Indochinese province of Annam, but used during the colonial period interchangeably with the term Indochinois.

¹³ Research for the Frame project and the construction of its interactive database revealed that depictions of both the Alsatian *Malgré-Nous* and other non-German groups in the *Werhmacht*, remain minimal in depictions of World War Two in French literature. www.frame.leeds.ac.uk/database

¹⁴ <http://frenchculture.org/film-tv-and-new-media/interviews/lam-le-presents-his-new-film-cong-binh> consulted 16/05/16.

¹⁵ See Hargreaves, A. G, "Indigènes: A Sign of the Times", *Research in African Literatures* 38(4), 2007, 204-216.

¹⁶ As these workers were not soldiers they do not qualify for pensions in the same way as the *tirailleurs* and *goumiers*. It was claimed that they were given an indemnity payment on their repatriation to Indochina in the late 1940s. The French government claim that they do not qualify for a civilian pension, as neither the workers nor their employers (the Vichy government) paid national insurance contributions during the Occupation. (Daum, 2009).