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Colonial exploitation and socioeconomic transformation in Cochinchina (1862–1945): An approach based on the Core-periphery model

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the mechanisms of French colonial exploitation in Cochinchina (1862–1945) through a political–economic perspective and the theoretical framework of the center–periphery model. Drawing on diverse primary sources from the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), including the *Procès-verbaux du Conseil colonial*, *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine*, and *Bulletin officiel de l'Indochine française*, the study reconstructs the power and economic structures that led to Cochinchina's conversion into a dependent economy serving the French capitalist core. Four main pillars of the exploitation system are identified: (1) a centralized administrative apparatus and direct rule; (2) a land monopoly regime and plantation economy; (3) a trade and financial network controlled by French capital; and (4) transport and urban infrastructures designed for export. Within Wallerstein's theoretical framework, Cochinchina is conceptualized as a "modernized yet dependent periphery," a region where growth and modernization were tied to dependency. The findings reveal that the colonial system not only drained resources but also constructed a three-level social hierarchy: The French ruling class, an intermediary class of Chinese and French-Vietnamese Eurasians, and the vast majority of native peasants and laborers. By combining qualitative document analysis with quantitative economic data, this article contributes to understanding the structural and enduring nature of Cochinchina's socioeconomic dependency during the broader formation of global capitalism.

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Introduction

On June 5, 1862, following the Treaty of Rén Xū (壬戌), the Nguyễn dynasty was forced to cede three eastern provinces of Cochinchina to France. From that moment, Cochinchina became the first directly ruled French territory in Vietnam. In the inaugural session of the Colonial Council in 1885, Governor Béguin declared: *"Cochinchine n'est pas une possession à demi; elle est une colonie, et comme telle doit fournir sa part de richesse à la métropole"* (Béguin, 1885). This statement encapsulated the essence of the French colonial strategy: to transform Cochinchina into a fully exploited economic periphery serving the metropole. Decrees published in the *Journal officiel de l'Indo-Chine française* during the early 1890s stipulated that all lands, taxation, and infrastructure in Cochinchina were placed under the direct control of the Governor and the Colonial Council (Booth, 2007; Frank, 1967; Wallerstein, 1974).

From the early twentieth century, a number of colonial scholars provided detailed depictions of the economic system of Cochinchina. Pierre Gourou (1940) emphasized the Mekong Delta as the rice granary of all Indochina, while Paul Bernard (1934) regarded Cochinchina as one of France's richest colonies in the Far East. Reports of the *Banque de l'Indochine* in its *Bulletins économiques* illustrated the intricate financial, credit, and export networks linked to the port of Saigon. After 1975, Vietnamese historians began to produce substantial domestic scholarship on this subject. Trần, Đinh & Nguyễn (1960/1961) examined the colonial power structure and the emergence of the Cochinchinese landed elite; Nguyễn (1994, 2001, 2002) analyzed the mechanisms of economic monopoly and the role of Chinese merchants. However, these

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works largely remained descriptive in nature. More recently, several international scholars have adopted modern analytical frameworks. Michael Cleary (2003) explored the legal foundations of colonial land policy; Dell (2017) investigated local collective action as a developmental variable; and George Peter Kelly (2000) examined education as an instrument of colonial governance. Yet, no existing study has systematically integrated archival materials from the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (BnF) with the core – periphery framework. Despite the extensive historiography, three major research gaps remain.

First, there has been no structural analysis of the interconnections among administrative power, land ownership, trade – finance monopolies, and colonial infrastructure (Gourou, 1940; Bernard, 1934). Second, administrative and statistical sources from the BnF – such as *Procès-verbaux du Conseil colonial*, *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine*, and *Bulletin officiel de l'Indochine française* – have yet to be systematically employed (Béguin, 1885). Third, the core-periphery theory developed by Wallerstein (1974) has not been comprehensively applied to interpret Cochinchina's structural dependency within the global capitalist network.

This study aims to analyze the mechanisms of French colonial extraction in Cochinchina (1862–1945) through the lens of political economy, integrating archival materials from the BnF with Wallerstein's world-systems theory. The central research questions address: (1) the administrative design of the colonial apparatus serving extraction (Béguin, 1885); (2) the monopoly regime of land and plantations (Cleary, 2003); (3) the organization of trade, finance, and infrastructure networks (Gourou, 1940; Bernard, 1934); and (4) the long-term developmental consequences (Dell, 2017).

The article contributes in four principal ways:

1. It systematically employs original French archival sources to reconstruct the inner structure of colonial exploitation;
2. It bridges the core, periphery theoretical framework with historical analysis, moving beyond descriptive historiography;
3. It situates Cochinchina within a comparative Southeast Asian perspective, alongside Java, Malaya, and the Philippines;
4. It integrates theory, data, and empirical analysis to explain the mechanisms of extraction.

By combining archival evidence with theoretical framing, the article conceptualizes Cochinchina not merely as a "French colony" but as a peripheral node within the global capitalist network of the early twentieth century. This analytical approach illuminates the long-term structural nature of colonial exploitation and clarifies the historical roots of regional inequality in Southern Vietnam.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a historical–political economy approach to analyze the mechanisms of French colonial extraction in Cochinchina from 1862 to 1945. Rather than presenting colonial history as a sequence of discrete events, it conceptualizes Cochinchina as a *systemic structure of extraction* built upon four interrelated dimensions: (1) administrative power; (2) land monopoly and plantation agriculture; (3) trade–financial networks; and (4) extraction-oriented infrastructure.

This analytical design is grounded in Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) core–periphery framework, which views Cochinchina as a *peripheral node* in the global capitalist network, directly shaped by the economic and political imperatives of the metropolitan center (France).

Data Sources

The research draws on both primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources are derived mainly from the digital archives of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (BnF) and several related repositories. These materials include:

1. *Procès-verbaux du Conseil colonial,* published in 1880–1930s – the minutes of the Cochinchina Colonial Council, detailing administrative deliberations and fiscal decisions;
2. *Journal officiel de l'Indo-Chine française,* published in 1893, and *Bulletin officiel de l'Indochine française,* published in 1889–1910s – official decrees, financial regulations, and administrative ordinances;
3. *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine* and *Annuaire général de l'Indochine* – quantitative datasets on demography, taxation, production, budgets, and infrastructure;
4. *Les Affiches saïgonnaises* and *Vie économique* (published by the *Banque de l'Indochine*) – records of trade flows, prices, exchange rates, credit, and import–export dynamics.

All sources were retrieved from the BnF's digital platform *Gallica*, enabling precise citation and data verification.

Secondary sources include three categories:
1. Classical works by Bernard (1934), Gourou (1940), and Wallerstein (1974);
2. Contemporary international research, such as Cleary (2003), Dell (2017), and Kelly (2000);
3. Vietnamese scholarship, notably Trần, Đinh & Nguyễn (1960/1961), and Nguyễn (1994, 2001, 2002).

The integration of these two data streams ensures both the empirical depth of archival reconstruction and the theoretical rigor of academic interpretation.

Analytical Procedure

The research process unfolds in three principal stages:
1. ***Archival analysis***: Primary materials were examined, translated, and cross-referenced to identify colonial policies, institutional configurations, and operational mechanisms of the extraction system.
2. ***Economic reconstruction***: Quantitative data on plantation acreage, export volume, capital investment, taxation, and infrastructure were standardized to reconstruct the scale and intensity of exploitation. These indicators clarify Cochinchina's position within the Indochinese and global colonial economies.
3. ***Core–periphery analysis***: The Wallersteinian framework (1974) was applied to interpret how Cochinchina was integrated into the French capitalist world-economy. The analysis distinguishes three interacting layers – the metropolitan center (France), the colonial intermediaries (French planters, merchants, and banks), and the subaltern population (the indigenous labor force).

Through the combination of qualitative interpretation (administrative structures, policy design, social response) and quantitative reconstruction (economic and statistical data), the study aims to offer a comprehensive, multidimensional understanding of colonial extraction.

Methodological Integration

The study draws from three disciplinary traditions:
- ***History*** provides contextual and documentary grounding;
- ***Political economy*** explains power relations and mechanisms of accumulation;
- ***Economic history*** reconstructs flows of trade, finance, and infrastructure over time.

This interdisciplinary synthesis moves beyond descriptive historiography toward an explanation of how the colonial system functioned as a *structural mechanism* and how its legacy shaped regional development trajectories.

Limitations and Reliability

The research acknowledges several methodological limitations. BnF sources primarily reflect the colonial administration's viewpoint and therefore require critical reading. Statistical data may be selective or incomplete, failing to capture informal or subaltern economic activities. Quantitative reconstructions are based chiefly on official series and thus subject to the biases inherent in colonial accounting.

Nevertheless, by triangulating multiple sources, conducting cross-verification, and documenting all archival references transparently, the study meets the contemporary standards of verifiability and replicability expected in modern historical and economic research.

Findings and Analysis

The Structure of Power and the Colonial Administrative Apparatus

Cochinchina represented France's model of direct colonial rule in Indochina. Unlike Tonkin and Annam – where France maintained protectorate arrangements – Cochinchina, from 1862 onward, was established as a *colonie de plein exercice* (a full-fledged colony) akin to Algeria or other overseas territories. According to decrees published in the *Journal officiel de l'Indo-Chine française* beginning in 1893, all executive, legislative, and judicial powers were concentrated in the office of the Governor of Cochinchina (*Gouverneur de la Cochinchine*), who served as the direct representative of the French government (Nguyễn, 1994, 2001, 2002).

A distinctive feature of this system was the absence of any indigenous political intermediary: French officials held exclusive control over public administration from the central level in Saigon down to the village. In the inaugural session of the Colonial Council in 1885, Governor Béguin explicitly declared, *"La Cochinchine est une colonie à part entière et doit contribuer à la grandeur économique de la France"* (Béguin, 1885).

The Administrative Hierarchy: Centralized Colonial Power

The colonial administrative hierarchy in Cochinchina operated on three interconnected tiers:

1. Central level – consisting of the Governor, the Colonial Council (*Conseil colonial*), and specialized departments (taxation, public works, agriculture, finance, police, health, education). This level formulated policy and exercised direct control over all aspects of economic and social governance.
2. Provincial level – administered by French *résidents*, who held combined executive, judicial, and fiscal powers. According to the *Annuaire administratif de l'Indochine* (1926–1936), Cochinchina was divided into twenty-one provinces, including twelve *residences principales* and nine *residences secondaires*. This configuration was designed to maintain strict surveillance over major agricultural zones and key transport arteries.
3. Village level – while traditional *hương chức hội tề* (village notables) were formally retained, actual authority resided in French officials. The *Réforme de 1904* institutionalized this arrangement, stipulating that all local fiscal and administrative decisions required French approval (Trần, Đinh & Nguyễn, 1960/1961).

This vertically integrated structure exemplified the core–periphery logic: administrative authority was monopolized at the colonial core, while indigenous governance at the periphery was reduced to a mere instrument of compliance.

The Colonial Council: The Political Arm of Capital

The Colonial Council of Cochinchina (*Conseil colonial de Cochinchine*), established in 1880, functioned as a pivotal organ of the colonial system. Despite its nominally consultative role, it effectively served as an institutional interface between colonial state power and private capital. Council membership comprised French officials, representatives of plantation companies, merchants, and bankers, along with a token number of local notables without real influence.

The *Procès-verbaux du Conseil colonial* (1885–1930) reveal that the Council's deliberations revolved around four recurrent themes: (1) taxation and revenue extraction; (2) land appropriation and plantation expansion; (3) infrastructure and transport investment; and (4) preferential treatment for French export enterprises (Béguin, 1885; Tholance, 1924). In several sessions, the Governor affirmed that *"la Cochinchine est la base financière de l'Indochine"* – Cochinchina was to serve as the financial backbone of the entire Indochinese Union.

The Council possessed the authority to approve budgets, sanction major infrastructure projects, and regulate tariffs, effectively blending state authority with capitalist interests. This arrangement produced what may be termed a "politico-economic symbiosis", in which colonial administration and private enterprise reinforced each other in sustaining the system of extraction.

Mechanisms of Social Control and Repression

Complementing administrative and economic dominance, the French established an extensive system of social surveillance and political repression. The *Sûreté* (colonial police and intelligence) monitored indigenous activities, particularly in urban centers such as Saigon and Cholon. The colonial judiciary (*Tribunal colonial*) maintained dual legal hierarchies: French citizens were governed by metropolitan law, while Vietnamese subjects were subject to modified indigenous codes under colonial supervision.

Records from the *Journal judiciaire de l'Indochine française* (1890–1920s) demonstrate the systematic legal stratification that privileged Europeans and subordinated the local population. Coercive control was not only political but also economic, designed to suppress peasant resistance and labor unrest on plantations – the very foundations of colonial surplus extraction.

Structural Features of Colonial Power in Cochinchina

Synthesizing the above, the colonial power structure of Cochinchina exhibited five defining characteristics:

1. Absolute centralization of authority in the Governor's office and the Colonial Council;
2. Absence of genuine indigenous political space, with local governance reduced to administrative compliance;
3. Fusion of administrative and capitalist interests, where the Council operated as the political instrument of French capital;
4. Tight legal and social control ensuring the durability of economic exploitation; and
5. Alignment with the core–periphery model, whereby Cochinchina functioned as a dependent periphery supplying resources, cheap labor, and financial surplus to the metropolitan core.

This administrative architecture demonstrates how colonial governance itself became a mechanism of accumulation, integrating political domination with economic extraction. Within the world systems framework, Cochinchina thus represented not merely a colony under foreign rule, but a structurally embedded periphery whose institutions were designed to sustain metropolitan accumulation and prevent endogenous development.

Land Monopoly and Large-Scale Agricultural Exploitation

Immediately after establishing control over Cochinchina in 1862, the French colonial administration launched an extensive program of land appropriation to facilitate the rise of capitalist plantations and loyalist landlord elites. Decrees published in the *Journal officiel de l'Indo-Chine française* (1893) and *Bulletin officiel de l'Indochine française* (1889–1910s) documented a series of policies for the "redistribution of public lands" (*terres domaniales*) to French companies, European settlers, and a small number of indigenous collaborators (Gouvernement général de l'Indochine, 1893).

According to data from the *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine*, the area under rice cultivation in Cochinchina doubled within twenty-five years, expanding from approximately 1.2 million hectares in 1885 to over 2.5 million hectares by 1910. The majority of this land fell under direct or indirect French control through concessions to large plantations such as *Société des Plantations des Terres Rouges* and *Société des Caoutchoucs du Donai*. The colonial *cadastre* (land registry), managed directly by the Governor's office, formalized this legalized dispossession, transforming peasants into tenants or wage laborers without formal property rights (Cleary, 2003).

Land Concessions and Agrarian Concentration

Records from the *Procès-verbaux du Conseil colonial* indicate that, by the late nineteenth century, the colonial administration had instituted a long-term land concession regime granting leases of 50 to 99 years to French investors, often accompanied by tax exemptions and infrastructure subsidies (Béguin, 1885; Tholance, 1924). The 1924 session of the Colonial Council reported that between 1910 and 1923, more than 700,000 hectares in provinces such as Long An, Mỹ Tho, Bến Tre, Gia Định, and Biên Hòa were transferred to French enterprises – amounting to nearly one-third of all cultivable land (Tholance, 1924).

This process generated a three-tier agrarian hierarchy (Cleary, 2003; Gourou, 1940; Nguyễn, 1994):

1. ***Top tier***: French plantation companies and large landowners, holding vast tracts and employing cheap labor;
2. ***Intermediate tier***: Chinese merchants and Franco-Vietnamese landlords acting as economic satellites of French capital;
3. ***Bottom tier***: indigenous peasants, stripped of land ownership and reduced to tenants or wage workers subject to multilayered exploitation.

This configuration mirrored landholding structures across other Southeast Asian colonies, such as British Malaya, Dutch Java, and the American Philippines (Wallerstein, 1974).

From Indigenous Agriculture to Export-Oriented Plantations

Before colonization, Cochinchina's agrarian economy was dominated by smallholder farming and communal land ownership. The imposition of the French concessionary regime transformed this traditional landscape into a large-scale, export-oriented plantation system. Data from the *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine* reveal that between 1900 and 1939:

- The cultivated area more than doubled;
- 60–70% of annual rice output was exported through the Port of Saigon;
- The proportion of landless peasants rose from roughly 25% to over 60% of the rural population;
- Wage labor became the dominant form of agricultural employment.

Pierre Gourou (1940) described this transformation as "the most profound structural change in the agricultural history of modern Vietnam" – a structural reorganization of the rural economy designed to meet metropolitan demand.

Multilayered Mechanisms of Exploitation

Land control served as the foundation for a complex web of economic extraction mechanisms:

1. Rents: plantation owners and landlords extracted high rents from tenant farmers;
2. Taxation: the colonial state imposed heavy land and production taxes, recorded annually in the *Annuaire administratif de l'Indochine* (1926–1936);
3. Export duties: levied on rice exports, providing fiscal revenue for the colonial administration and profit for French trading houses;
4. Credit dependency: peasants relied on high-interest loans from Chinese merchants and landlord intermediaries, reinforcing cycles of indebtedness (Bernard, 1934).

These mechanisms formed a closed circuit of accumulation – where land, taxation, credit, production, and trade were all controlled by the colonial core and its intermediary agents.

Structural Effects: Central Accumulation and Peripheral Dependency

Within Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems framework, the agrarian order of Cochinchina epitomized a dependent peripheral economy organized to sustain metropolitan accumulation. French capital monopolized land and dominated the entire value chain from production to export. Indigenous producers, severed from ownership of the means of production, were transformed into a cheap and dependent labor force.

This structure produced enduring socioeconomic consequences:

1. Deepening class stratification between French landlords, Chinese intermediaries, and Vietnamese peasants;

2. Persistent inequality in land ownership and access to credit;
3. Continuous transfer of surplus value to the metropolitan core, stifling local capital formation;
4. The emergence of "peripheral capitalism", in which colonial and semi-colonial capital networks in Cochinchina operated as extensions of French finance and trade.

The land monopoly system thus functioned as both an economic and political instrument of dependency, embedding Cochinchina within the French-dominated global economy. It also explains why, despite high agricultural productivity and export surplus, Cochinchina failed to achieve endogenous industrialization or balanced regional development.

Commercial–Financial Monopoly and French Capital Networks

Parallel to the establishment of land monopolies, the French colonial administration constructed an elaborate system of commercial and financial monopolies that bound Cochinchina's economy to the interests of metropolitan capital. Through legislation, banking networks, and trade regulations, France transformed Cochinchina into the economic core of Indochina's export system and a crucial node in the wider imperial trading network spanning Marseille, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

The Architecture of Colonial Trade Monopoly

By the late nineteenth century, trade in Cochinchina was dominated by a limited number of French trading houses (*maisons de commerce françaises*) and affiliated Chinese intermediaries (*cong ty Hoa kiều*). Archival records from the *Journal officiel de l'Indo-Chine française* (1893–1905) reveal that import and export licenses, customs rates, and shipping routes were all controlled by the Colonial Council of Cochinchina, ensuring exclusive privileges for French enterprises such as Denis Frères, Brossard et Mopin, and Société Française des Distilleries.

Export operations were concentrated in the port of Saigon, which functioned as the main entrepôt for the Indochinese Union. Data from the *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine* (1910–1938) show that rice, rubber, and coal accounted for nearly 85% of total exports, with France receiving more than two-thirds of this volume. In return, industrial goods – machinery, textiles, alcohol, cement, and processed food – were imported from France, reproducing a classic core–periphery trade pattern (Wallerstein, 1974; Bernard, 1934).

To consolidate this structure, the colonial state implemented a dual tariff system: low import duties for French goods and high barriers against competitors from Britain, Germany, or Japan. This policy effectively locked Cochinchina into a monocultural export dependency, where the colony functioned as a supplier of raw materials and a captive market for metropolitan manufactures (Booth, 2007).

The Banque de l'Indochine and Financial Domination

At the center of this economic architecture stood the Banque de l'Indochine, established by decree on January 21, 1875, as both a central bank and a commercial bank for French Indochina. Headquartered in Paris and with its colonial branch in Saigon, the bank enjoyed exclusive privileges: the right to issue currency, handle public debt, manage customs revenues, and provide credit to private enterprises (Cleary, 2003).

This institution effectively functioned as the financial arm of the French state in the Far East. Its primary functions included:

1. Currency issuance: The *piastre de commerce* was backed by French capital and tied to the franc, ensuring monetary subordination of local economies to the metropole;
2. Credit allocation: The bank provided preferential loans to French companies in plantation, shipping, and trade, while indigenous enterprises faced near-total exclusion from formal credit systems (Bernard, 1934);

3. Capital repatriation: Profits generated in Cochinchina were repatriated to France through a triangular circuit involving the Banque de l'Indochine, Crédit Lyonnais, and Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas (Cleary, 2003).

By 1930, according to the bank's *Bulletin économique*, over 70% of credit in Cochinchina was controlled by French and European financial institutions. Meanwhile, Chinese and Vietnamese merchants were relegated to small-scale, short-term lending, primarily through informal channels and pawnshops. This asymmetry entrenched a hierarchical financial order, in which capital accumulation was centralized in Paris, and peripheral regions functioned as liquidity sources rather than investment destinations.

Commercial Networks and the Role of Intermediaries

The trading networks of Cochinchina were structured through a tripartite hierarchy:

1. French trading houses controlled maritime shipping, insurance, and export contracts;
2. Chinese merchants (particularly from Cholon) dominated rice collection, domestic distribution, and informal credit;
3. Vietnamese producers occupied the lowest tier as suppliers of raw materials and agricultural labor.

This configuration created a dependent commercial nexus, in which local intermediaries served as extensions of metropolitan capital. The *Procès-verbaux du Conseil colonial* (1905–1930) demonstrate that even tax collection, warehouse management, and transport tariffs were calibrated to protect the profit margins of French trading firms.

Through such arrangements, the French established what Pierre Gourou (1940) termed *"une économie de dépendance totale"* – a totalizing economy of dependency, where the colony's productive system, trade flows, and financial circuits were all synchronized with the interests of the metropole.

Infrastructure and the Circulation of Capital

The trade – finance nexus was reinforced by extensive colonial infrastructure: the Saigon port complex, My Tho – Saigon railway (completed in 1885), Mekong Delta canal networks, and telegraph systems connecting Saigon to Marseille and Singapore. These projects were financed largely through colonial taxes and labor, yet served the interests of French capital. Archival budget data from the *Annuaire administratif de l'Indochine* (1926–1936) indicate that over 60% of infrastructure expenditure during this period directly supported export-oriented industries and port expansion.

The colonial administration justified such investments as "modernization," but in practice they represented "infrastructures of extraction" – designed to accelerate the outward flow of resources while internal development lagged behind. This asymmetry exemplifies the *"peripheral modernization"* phenomenon later discussed by Frank (1967) and Wallerstein (1974): modernization without autonomy, progress without structural transformation.

The Structural Logic of Commercial – Financial Monopoly

Synthesizing the evidence, the commercial–financial system of Cochinchina embodied five structural features:

1. Monopolization of trade and finance by French capital, reinforced through legal and institutional privileges;
2. Dependence on export–import asymmetry, with raw materials flowing outward and manufactured goods flowing inward;
3. Concentration of credit and liquidity in metropolitan financial centers;
4. Instrumental use of infrastructure as a mechanism of extraction;

5. Institutionalized collaboration between the colonial state and private capital, fusing political and economic power.

Within the core–periphery framework, these dynamics illustrate how Cochinchina operated as a financial and commercial appendage of the French metropole – a peripheral economy integrated into global circuits of accumulation without autonomous capacity for reinvestment or industrialization.

The monopoly of trade and finance thus represented not merely an economic phenomenon but a systemic mechanism of colonial control, reproducing dependency through every stage of circulation – from land to labor, production to capital flow, and taxation to profit repatriation.

Colonial Infrastructure and the Spatial Economy of Extraction

The construction of colonial infrastructure in Cochinchina represented one of the most visible manifestations of French economic domination. From the late nineteenth century onward, the colonial administration embarked on a massive program of public works – canals, railways, roads, ports, and urban projects – financed largely by local taxation and labor coercion. Although officially framed as "modernization" and "civilization," these infrastructures functioned primarily as instruments of resource extraction and spatial control, designed to integrate Cochinchina into the global circulation of French capital.

The Political Economy of Infrastructure Investment

According to the *Annuaire administratif de l'Indochine* (1926–1936) and budgetary reports presented to the *Conseil colonial*, over 60% of public investment during this period was allocated to transportation, irrigation, and port expansion in the Mekong Delta and Saigon–Cholon complex. Infrastructure expenditure was financed through colonial taxation, particularly land and export taxes, meaning that peasants and laborers indirectly funded the very structures that facilitated their economic subordination.

The *Procès-verbaux du Conseil colonial* reveal that the selection of infrastructure projects consistently prioritized export-oriented objectives – canals to transport rice, roads to connect plantations, and railways to expedite shipments to the Saigon port. Projects not directly serving export interests – such as rural education, local markets, or public welfare – received negligible funding.

This pattern confirms what Wallerstein (1974) terms *"the infrastructural logic of the periphery"*: investments that expand extraction capacity while suppressing autonomous local development.

Transportation Networks and the Geography of Extraction

By 1939, Cochinchina possessed over 3,000 kilometers of navigable canals and rivers, 1,400 kilometers of primary and secondary roads, and 320 kilometers of railway lines (Gouvernement général de l'Indochine, 1939). These routes formed a radial network converging on Saigon – the colonial capital and primary export hub.

Canals and waterways: The French expanded the precolonial irrigation system into an extensive canal network that linked rice-growing provinces such as Long Xuyên, Cần Thơ, and Sóc Trăng directly to export depots in Saigon and Mỹ Tho. While these canals increased agricultural output, they also deepened the ecological transformation of the delta, subordinating hydraulic engineering to export imperatives rather than local agrarian needs (Gourou, 1940).

Railways and roads: The My Tho–Saigon railway (completed in 1885) and the Saigon–Bien Hoa line (1912) primarily served the transportation of rice, rubber, and coal. Highway routes such as Route Coloniale No. 1 (Saigon–My Tho) and Route Coloniale No. 16 (Saigon–Can Tho) linked plantation zones to ports and customs checkpoints. These arteries reconfigured the spatial hierarchy of the colony – from dispersed local economies to centralized export corridors.

Ports and logistics: The Saigon port, expanded between 1890 and 1930, became one of the busiest harbors in Southeast Asia. Annual cargo volume rose from 300,000 tons in 1900 to over 2.5 million tons by 1939, with rice constituting the dominant export commodity. Archival data from *Les Affiches saïgonnaises* and *Vie économique* document the concentration of maritime insurance, brokerage, and freight services under French and European firms, reinforcing Saigon's role as a *colonial entrepôt*.

Through these spatial interventions, the colonial state reshaped the territorial economy of Cochinchina, embedding every level of production – from paddy fields to ports – within a system of extraction oriented toward the metropolitan core.

Urban Development and Colonial Modernity

Infrastructure expansion was accompanied by a deliberate policy of urban transformation, most prominently in Saigon and Cholon. French urban planners envisioned Saigon as the *"Paris of the Orient"* – a display of imperial modernity symbolizing France's civilizing mission. Colonial authorities built wide boulevards, administrative quarters, and European residential districts while relegating indigenous populations to peripheral zones such as Cholon, which became the hub of Chinese commerce and labor settlements.

This dual-city model (Brocheux & Hémery, 2001) institutionalized spatial segregation: Saigon represented order, hygiene, and authority, while Cholon embodied labor, trade, and informality. Together they formed a colonial urban system where space itself became an instrument of economic control and social hierarchy.

Urban infrastructure – electric grids, tramways, drainage, and telegraph systems – was developed primarily to serve European administrative and commercial needs. Despite generating significant fiscal revenues, the benefits of "modernization" were unevenly distributed. Indigenous urban dwellers faced rising living costs, spatial exclusion, and intensified surveillance under the *Sûreté coloniale*.

Infrastructures of Extraction and Dependency

From a world-systems perspective, colonial infrastructure in Cochinchina exemplified what Frank (1967) and Wallerstein (1974) describe as *"dependent modernization"* – technological advancement subordinated to external capital accumulation. The colonial state constructed infrastructures not as public goods but as technologies of extraction that linked local production to global markets under asymmetric power relations.

This system produced three structural consequences:

1. Spatial polarization – economic activity concentrated along export corridors while rural hinterlands remained underdeveloped;
2. Fiscal dependency – local taxation funded infrastructure serving metropolitan capital rather than domestic welfare;
3. Path dependence – postcolonial development inherited the same spatial and economic asymmetries, perpetuating regional inequality.

The Spatial Logic of Colonial Capitalism

Synthesizing the above, the spatial economy of Cochinchina reveals the deep entanglement between infrastructure and imperial capitalism. The colonial transport and communication networks operated as circulatory systems of extraction, channeling agricultural surplus and financial flows toward the metropolitan core.

In this sense, infrastructure served as both the *symbol* and the *substance* of colonial power – materially transforming the landscape while structurally embedding dependency. The very roads, canals, and ports that symbolized "progress" became the conduits through which wealth was extracted and inequality reproduced.

As Wallerstein (1974) observes, "in the periphery, modernization is rarely autonomous; it is the infrastructure of someone else's prosperity." Cochinchina's colonial infrastructure thus stands as a historical testament to that paradox – modernization without emancipation, growth without autonomy.

Colonial Class Structure and Social Transformation

The establishment of the colonial economy in Cochinchina not only reorganized patterns of production and ownership but also reconfigured the entire social hierarchy. The penetration of French capital, the rise of plantation and commercial monopolies, and the institutionalization of administrative control produced a new colonial class structure in which political authority, economic privilege, and ethnic hierarchy were tightly interwoven.

The Formation of a Stratified Colonial Society

Archival records from the *Annuaire général de l'Indochine* (1905–1938) and the *Procès-verbaux du Conseil colonial* reveal that the social order of Cochinchina crystallized into a multi-tiered hierarchy, reflecting both economic function and ethnic differentiation:

1. The French colonial elite – comprising administrators, planters, bankers, and professionals – constituted the ruling class. They monopolized political power and controlled the commanding heights of the economy through ownership of plantations, trading houses, and financial institutions such as the *Banque de l'Indochine*.
2. The intermediary class of Chinese and Franco-Vietnamese collaborators acted as economic mediators. Chinese merchants dominated rice collection, processing, and domestic trade, while Franco-Vietnamese bureaucrats and notables served in auxiliary administrative positions, forming a thin stratum of semi-privileged intermediaries.
3. The indigenous peasantry and urban laborers – the majority population – constituted the base of the colonial social pyramid. Dispossessed of land and excluded from formal credit or education, they supplied the cheap labor that sustained the colonial export economy.

This tripartite structure reflected what Wallerstein (1974) defines as the social articulation of the core–periphery relationship, where the colonial elite and intermediary classes operated as extensions of metropolitan interests, while indigenous labor constituted the periphery's substructure of exploitation.

The Emergence of New Elites and Social Intermediaries

The colonial administration pursued a deliberate policy of cultivating new local elites who could stabilize French rule. Through education, bureaucracy, and limited access to property, these elites were integrated into the colonial order as collaborators.

The *Collège Chasseloup-Laubat* (founded 1874) and the *École de Médecine de Saigon* (1902) trained small numbers of Vietnamese students in administrative and technical disciplines, producing what Brocheux and Hémery (2001) termed *"une élite de service"* – a service elite whose privileges depended on loyalty to colonial authority.

This process created a narrow but influential layer of Franco-Vietnamese civil servants, professionals, and teachers, whose ambivalent position – benefiting from colonial modernity yet marginalized from full participation – would later shape the ideological ferment of the early twentieth century.

Urbanization and the Rise of a Colonial Working Class

Rapid infrastructure expansion and the development of plantation economies generated significant rural displacement, pushing landless peasants into urban centers and plantation zones. By the 1930s, Saigon–Cholon had become a dual city of conspicuous European affluence and vast indigenous poverty.

Industrial and plantation employment expanded dramatically:

- In 1937, Cochinchina counted more than 120,000 registered industrial and plantation laborers;

- Wages for Vietnamese workers averaged one-tenth of those paid to Europeans (Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine, 1938);
- Working conditions were marked by long hours, coercive discipline, and absence of legal protection.

These conditions catalyzed the emergence of an incipient working-class consciousness. Labor unrest – most notably the strikes at the Ba Son Shipyard (1925) and the Michelin Rubber Plantations (1930) – signaled the beginning of organized social resistance within the colonial order (Trần, Đinh & Nguyễn, 1960/1961).

Cultural Hybridization and the Contradictions of Modernity

While the colonial system entrenched inequality, it simultaneously fostered processes of cultural hybridization. Western education, printing, and journalism facilitated the diffusion of new intellectual currents – liberalism, socialism, and anti-colonial nationalism – among segments of the Franco-Vietnamese elite and urban intelligentsia.

Saigon's press – *La Tribune indigène*, *La Cloche Fêlée*, and later *Đông Pháp thời báo* – became arenas for debate on reform, autonomy, and cultural identity (Kelly, 2000). These currents reveal the paradox of colonial modernity: the very instruments of domination – schools, presses, bureaucracies – also nurtured the seeds of resistance.

The coexistence of material modernization and social exclusion gave rise to what Nguyễn (2001) described as a *dual modernity*: modern institutions without equality, and progress without liberation. Within the Wallersteinian framework, this reflects the *peripheral condition* in which modernization reproduces dependency rather than emancipation.

Structural Transformation and Colonial Dependency

By the 1930s, the social transformation of Cochinchina was complete:

1. A European ruling class consolidated political control and extracted economic surplus;
2. A semi-colonial elite mediated between the metropole and indigenous society;
3. A fragmented subaltern population supplied labor but remained excluded from ownership and power.

This structure produced enduring patterns of dependency and inequality. Capital, knowledge, and authority flowed from the periphery to the core, while social mobility within Cochinchina remained structurally constrained.

The colonial social formation thus exemplifies what Frank (1967) terms the *"development of underdevelopment"* – a process whereby the modernization of social institutions serves to entrench, rather than alleviate, structural subordination.

The Legacy of Colonial Social Transformation

The long-term effects of this colonial class structure persisted beyond 1945. The concentration of land, wealth, and education among colonial and intermediary elites shaped patterns of postcolonial inequality in southern Vietnam. Moreover, the emergence of a Western-educated intelligentsia – rooted in colonial institutions yet alienated from both the metropole and the masses – laid the groundwork for the ideological divisions that would later define the region's political landscape.

In this sense, the colonial social order of Cochinchina was not merely a historical episode but a structural template that reproduced dependency through generations. As Wallerstein (1974) argued, the periphery's transformation under capitalism rarely leads to integration on equal terms; rather, it solidifies a hierarchy in which local elites internalize and perpetuate the logic of external domination.

Discussion

Reconstructing the Colonial Mechanism of Extraction

The empirical findings drawn from archival sources reveal that French colonial rule in Cochinchina constituted a systematic and multi-dimensional mechanism of extraction, organized through a tightly interlocking structure of political, economic, and spatial domination.

At its core, the system functioned through four mutually reinforcing components:

- ***Administrative centralization***, in which the Governor and Colonial Council exercised total control over legislation, taxation, and budgetary allocation;
- ***Land monopoly***, which transferred vast tracts of fertile land to French planters and corporations under long-term concessions;
- ***Commercial–financial control***, institutionalized through the *Banque de l'Indochine* and exclusive trading privileges; and
- **Infrastructure and spatial reorganization**, which integrated production zones into export corridors centered on Saigon.

This constellation of institutions and policies transformed Cochinchina from an agrarian society into a peripheral economy fully subordinated to the French metropole. Every layer of its economic and administrative life – land, labor, trade, taxation, and capital – was oriented toward the reproduction of metropolitan accumulation rather than local development.

The Logic of the Core–Periphery Relationship

Applying Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory, the French colonial economy in Cochinchina can be conceptualized as a *"peripheral subsystem"* embedded within the global capitalist order. In this configuration:

- The *metropolitan core (France)* extracted surplus value through monopoly control over trade, finance, and industry;
- The *colonial apparatus in Cochinchina* functioned as an intermediary mechanism for transferring resources, labor, and revenue;
- The *indigenous population* constituted the dependent periphery, integrated into global capitalism under conditions of structural subordination.

This triangular dynamic – core, intermediary, periphery – generated a *circulation of dependency*: the colony's prosperity directly reinforced the metropole's industrial expansion, while inhibiting local capital formation and technological autonomy.

As Frank (1967) later described, such dependency represents not merely an outcome but a *structural condition* of the capitalist world economy. Cochinchina's economic "modernization" thus embodied the paradox of *development without independence* – an economic dynamism whose benefits were externally appropriated.

Economic Modernization as Structural Dependency

From a quantitative perspective, the transformation of Cochinchina between 1880 and 1940 appears striking: rice exports multiplied fivefold; rubber plantations expanded exponentially; and urban infrastructure – railways, ports, canals – reached unprecedented levels. Yet these indicators of growth mask the asymmetric ownership structure underpinning them.

The majority of productive assets, capital, and profits were controlled by metropolitan companies and their local affiliates. Statistical data from the *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine* (1938) show that over 80% of export revenue accrued to French enterprises, while less than 10% was reinvested locally. Wages for Vietnamese laborers remained stagnant despite soaring export values, indicating a widening gap between productivity and remuneration.

This evidence supports Wallerstein's (1974) argument that capital accumulation at the core is predicated upon the disarticulation of the periphery – where productive sectors are externally oriented, and local demand and industry remain underdeveloped. Cochinchina exemplified this structural condition: modernization served as the means of maintaining dependence, not overcoming it.

The Colonial State as an Agent of Accumulation

The analysis further demonstrates that the colonial state functioned not as a neutral administrator, but as the primary agent of capitalist accumulation.

1. The *Conseil colonial* regulated taxation and tariffs to favor French enterprises;
2. Public budgets financed export infrastructure rather than local welfare;
3. Legal frameworks institutionalized unequal property rights between Europeans and natives.

The state thus acted as an instrument of class and spatial domination, fusing political power with economic privilege. Its coercive apparatus – administration, police, judiciary – ensured compliance and suppressed dissent, thereby stabilizing the mechanisms of extraction.

This configuration reflects what Poulantzas (1978) termed the *"state of dependent capitalism"* – a polity whose institutional form and functions are structured to reproduce the dominance of external capital. Within this context, the colonial administration in Cochinchina represented the localized embodiment of France's global capitalist interests.

Social Transformation and the Reproduction of Inequality

Colonial economic structures engendered profound social polarization. At the apex stood the French administrative and capitalist elite; beneath them, a layer of Chinese and Franco-Vietnamese intermediaries; and at the base, the vast indigenous peasantry and laboring classes.

This tripartite social order mirrored the economic hierarchy of the core–periphery relationship. Wealth, education, and power were concentrated in the hands of those linked to the colonial apparatus, while the majority remained excluded from mobility or ownership.

Simultaneously, the introduction of Western education, press, and bureaucracy fostered new forms of social consciousness. A small Western-educated intelligentsia emerged, articulating reformist and anti-colonial ideas through newspapers, associations, and political movements (Kelly, 2000). Yet even this intellectual awakening remained circumscribed by the colonial structure – it was a critique born within dependency.

The coexistence of modernization and inequality epitomizes the dialectic of colonial modernity: progress that deepens subordination.

Comparative Insights within Southeast Asia

When viewed comparatively, Cochinchina's colonial transformation shared structural similarities with other Southeast Asian colonies – British Malaya, Dutch Java, and the American Philippines (Booth, 2007). Each exhibited the same patterns of export-oriented agriculture, infrastructural modernization, and social bifurcation.

However, Cochinchina's direct rule model and the concentration of French capital gave it an even higher degree of integration into the metropolitan economy. Unlike Java or Malaya, where local elites retained limited economic space, Cochinchina's colonial system eliminated indigenous autonomy almost entirely.

This comparative perspective reinforces Wallerstein's (1974) proposition that the world economy's peripheries are differentiated by degree but unified by function: each serves as a site of surplus extraction sustaining the industrial core.

Structural Legacy and Historical Continuity

The findings also highlight the enduring path dependency of Cochinchina's colonial institutions. Patterns of land concentration, infrastructural imbalance, and class stratification established under colonial rule persisted into the postcolonial era.

Even after independence, the region's economy remained heavily dependent on export agriculture and foreign capital. The historical trajectory of southern Vietnam thus exemplifies the long durée of dependency, where colonial structures evolve but their underlying logic endures.

As Wallerstein (1979) later emphasized, world-systems are not dismantled by political change alone; they persist through institutional and spatial continuities that reproduce inequality over time.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to world-systems scholarship by demonstrating how colonial extraction operated not merely through trade but through institutionalized spatial, administrative, and social mechanisms. Cochinchina's experience underscores that peripherality is not a passive condition but an actively produced structure, maintained through governance, finance, and ideology.

The case also enriches debates on colonial modernity in Asia, showing that technological and infrastructural advancement can coexist with deep structural dependency – a dynamic shared across Southeast Asian colonies yet expressed most completely in the French model of direct rule.

Synthesis

In synthesis, the French colonial system in Cochinchina (1862–1945) exemplifies the integration of political domination, economic monopoly, and spatial reorganization within the logic of the world capitalist system.

- Administrative centralization institutionalized dependency.
- Land monopoly ensured economic control.
- Trade and financial networks transmitted surplus to the core.
- Infrastructure reconfigured space for extraction.
- Social transformation reproduced inequality and ideological hegemony.

Together, these dimensions reveal that colonialism was not a transitional phase but a structural articulation of global capitalism, in which Cochinchina functioned as a *peripheral mechanism* sustaining metropolitan accumulation.

As Wallerstein (1974) succinctly observed, *"The periphery does not lag behind because it is backward; it lags because it is integrated into the world economy in a particular way."* Cochinchina's history exemplifies that integration – a history of modernization without autonomy, prosperity without equality, and development that deepened dependency.

Conclusion

This study has reconstructed the political–economic architecture of French colonial exploitation in Cochinchina (1862–1945) through the analytical lens of core–periphery theory. By integrating archival sources from the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* with world-systems analysis, it demonstrates that colonial rule was not a sequence of discrete administrative acts but a coherent mechanism of extraction. The colonial system fused political domination, economic monopoly, and spatial reorganization into an enduring structure that subordinated Cochinchina to the accumulation needs of the French capitalist core. Administrative centralization, plantation land regimes, monopolized trade – finance networks, and export-oriented infrastructure together produced a colonial economy that was modernized in form yet dependent in essence.

The evidence reveals that modernization under colonial rule in Cochinchina was a paradoxical process – development without autonomy. The Governor and Colonial Council institutionalized direct rule, the *Banque de l'Indochine* monopolized credit and currency, and

French capital commanded production, distribution, and transport. This integration transformed the Mekong Delta and Saigon – Cholon corridor into highly productive but structurally dependent zones. Growth indicators – expanding rice exports, railways, ports, and plantations – masked the continuous transfer of surplus to the metropole. Within Wallerstein's framework, Cochinchina epitomized the peripheral condition: its prosperity sustained France's industrial expansion while its stagnation guaranteed the persistence of global inequality.

The findings further show that the colonial state acted simultaneously as administrator and capitalist agent. It legislated to protect metropolitan property, financed export infrastructure through indigenous taxation, and repressed labor movements to stabilize production. This fusion of governance and accumulation created what Poulantzas (1978) later termed a "state of dependent capitalism," where political institutions served global capital rather than national development. Beneath this institutional order emerged a stratified colonial society: a ruling French elite, an intermediary class of Chinese and Franco-Vietnamese collaborators, and a mass of dispossessed peasants and workers. This tripartite hierarchy mirrored the global division of labor between core, semi-periphery, and periphery, embedding dependency within the colony's social fabric.

Beyond empirical reconstruction, this research contributes theoretically by emphasizing that dependency operates through institutions as much as through markets. The colonial experience of Cochinchina demonstrates that peripherality was a deliberately produced outcome - engineered through governance, law, and spatial design. Infrastructure, taxation, and education were orchestrated to integrate the colony into global capitalism rather than foster endogenous development. This insight extends world-systems analysis by highlighting how colonial modernity functioned as a structural reproduction of inequality, converting modernization itself into an instrument of control.

The colonial legacy persisted far beyond 1945. Patterns of land concentration, infrastructural imbalance, and elite dependency continued into the postcolonial era, shaping Southern Vietnam's uneven development and reliance on export agriculture and foreign capital. Bureaucratic rationality and hierarchical governance introduced under French rule influenced later state formation, exemplifying the *longue durée* of colonial institutions in the global South. Historical capitalism, as Wallerstein argued, reproduces itself through institutional continuity rather than rupture.

In sum, the history of Cochinchina encapsulates the paradox of colonial modernity – progress that entrenched inequality and modernization that reinforced subordination. Its infrastructures and institutions were not neutral artifacts of "civilization" but enduring instruments of extraction, embedding southern Vietnam into the asymmetric geometry of global capitalism. The periphery's underdevelopment, as Wallerstein (1974) observed, is not the absence of progress but the result of a developmental pattern that sustains the core. Understanding this legacy remains essential for reinterpreting colonial history and confronting the structural continuities that still shape postcolonial development today.

The historical logic of colonial extraction continues to influence governance and resource distribution in contemporary Southeast Asia. The centralized administrative hierarchies, fiscal dependencies, and spatial inequalities established under colonial rule have endured in modified institutional forms across the postcolonial states of the region. Patterns of elite control over land, finance, and infrastructure remain deeply rooted in the colonial past, shaping present-day development trajectories and political economies. Understanding these continuities allows for a critical reassessment of how the colonial world-system persists beneath the surface of modern governance. In this sense, the legacy of Cochinchina is not confined to history – it remains a living structure of power, informing the governance logic and distributive regimes of the global South today.

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