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**FRENCH COLONIALISM AND THE ISSUE OF LAND PRIVATIZATION IN VIETNAM:
A STUDY OF SOUTHWESTERN COCHINCHINA (1867–1940)**

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The article examines the process of land privatization in Southwestern Cochinchina (Vietnam) from 1867 to 1940 under French colonial rule, drawing on colonial administrative reports, cadastral records, and relevant scholarship, particularly archival materials currently preserved at the National Archives Center II in Ho Chi Minh City. The research has applied historical, logical, and quantitative methods to analyze how the colonial state established a legal framework through land registration, concessions, and public auctions that transformed land into a transferable commodity and integrated it into the colonial market economy. This institutional framework not only legitimized private ownership but also facilitated the circulation, accumulation, and concentration of land on an unprecedented scale. While these policies, together with major investments in hydraulic infrastructure, especially the expansion of canal networks, enabled large-scale land reclamation and the rapid growth of cultivated areas, turning Southwestern Cochinchina into the principal rice-producing center of Indochina, they also generated profound structural imbalances. Land increasingly concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of landowners, including not only French concessionaires but also a segment of wealthy Vietnamese elites, some of whom acquired French citizenship and actively participated in large-scale land accumulation. Meanwhile, the majority of rural inhabitants remained smallholders or landless peasants, facing growing dependence on tenancy, credit, and fluctuating market conditions. As a result, traditional communal landholding structures were progressively eroded, and a highly stratified rural society emerged, characterized by unequal access to land and widening socio-economic disparities. By situating these transformations within the broader logic of colonial exploitation, the article underscores the dual nature of French policies, which simultaneously promoted agricultural expansion and commercialization while deepening social inequalities and fundamentally reshaping agrarian relations in Southwestern Cochinchina.

Keywords: agrarian relations; French colonial period; Indochina; land privatization; Southwestern Cochinchina

Introduction

Southwestern Cochinchina¹ was an extensive alluvial plain located at the southernmost end of the Indochina Peninsula, corresponding to the present-day Mekong Delta

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provinces of Vietnam, covering approximately 40,000 square kilometers. The region occupies a geographically and historically strategic position in Vietnam's southward territorial expansion. Endowed with a dense river network and fertile alluvial soils, it has long played a central role in agricultural development, particularly in wet-rice cultivation – the primary livelihood of local inhabitants and a major agricultural product of Vietnam in the modern period.

In terms of natural conditions, Southwestern Cochinchina features low, flat terrain that is continuously enriched by sediments from the *Tien* and *Hau* rivers. The soils comprise mainly alluvial, acid sulphate, and saline lands, offering high agricultural potential if proper irrigation systems are implemented. The tropical monsoon climate, characterized by two distinct seasons and abundant water resources, provides favorable conditions for wet-rice agriculture [Binh et al. 1990, 259].

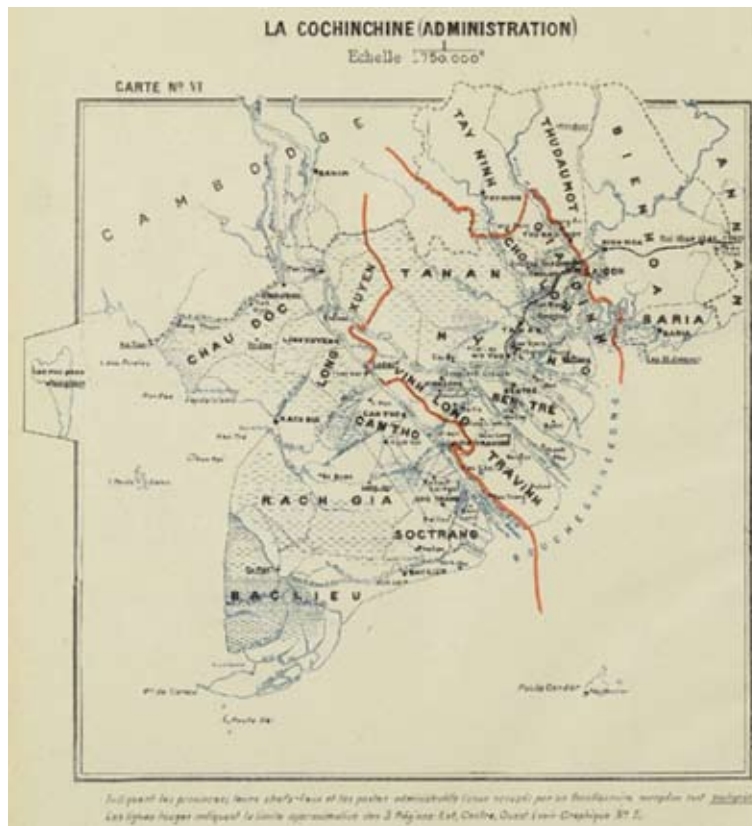
Regarding population and society, before French colonization, the region was home to diverse communities. The Vietnamese migrated from the northern and central areas during the 17th and 18th centuries, establishing villages and reclaiming land in accordance with traditional patterns. Besides, Khmer, Chinese, and a small number of Cham inhabitants also resided in the area, creating a culturally and ethnically diverse social structure. Within this framework, the Vietnamese gradually became predominant in terms of population and landholdings. Still, Khmer communities remained closely tied to many of their ancestral lands, particularly in the provinces of *Soc Trang* and *An Giang*.

Before the French conquest, land management relied primarily on communal and private ownership, as regulated by the Nguyen dynasty. Although the system remained loose and lacked a comprehensive legal framework, it remained in place. The land tenure situation in Southwestern Cochinchina reflected the characteristics of a traditional smallholder agrarian economy. Land was reclaimed mainly through the effort of peasants and local officials, resulting in the coexistence of large “landed estates”² and smaller private plots. Ownership rights were often unclear, as communal land continued to play a significant role in village life, while the tendency toward private ownership gradually increased, particularly among wealthier social classes. Nevertheless, the legal system governing land was largely unstandardized; the registration and recognition of ownership relied heavily on customary practices, leading to instability and vulnerability to external interventions – particularly under colonial influence.

In 1867, French colonialists occupied all three southwestern provinces of Cochinchina³. In 1874, the Hue court signed the *Traité de paix et d'amitié entre la France et le royaume de l'Annam, 15 mars 1874* (the Treaty of *Giap Tuat*) with France. One of the main provisions of “the Treaty of 1874, in recognizing our complete sovereignty over Cochinchina, created for us a privileged position throughout all of Annam; it established for our benefit a kind of protectorate that imposes duties upon us while at the same time granting us certain advantages” [Lemire 1884, 13–15]. Cochinchina was transformed into a colony, marking a significant turning point in the region's history (see map *La Cochinchina – Administration* (Figure 1)).

France considered this a key area for colonial exploitation due to its abundant rice potential and its strategic location, both in terms of military and trade. To transform this land into a source of benefits for the country, the colonial government implemented a series of policies related to land. On the one hand, France carried out measurement, localization, and establishment of a land management mechanism according to modern European-style laws, replacing the traditional practices of the Vietnamese. On the other hand, they expropriated public land, legalized the ownership rights of Vietnamese landowners and French investors, and encouraged privatization in order to transform land into a commodity that could be bought, sold, mortgaged, and transferred.

Figure 1
Administrative map of Cochinchina during
the French colonial period (1867–1940)



Source: [Brenier 1914, 26]

French Colonialism and the Process of Establishing a Legal Mechanism for the Private Ownership of Land in the Southwestern Cochinchina

The process of establishing a legal mechanism for private ownership of land in the Southwestern Cochinchina occurred in a specific context, linked to the need for resource exploitation and the consolidation of power following the French’s completion of the occupation of the three provinces of *Vinh Long*, *Chau Doc*, and *Ha Tien* in June 1867. For the colonial government, the reorganization of land ownership was not only economically significant in encouraging reclamation and tax collection but also a political tool to legitimize power and create a stable foundation in the newly conquered lands.

Unlike *Saigon*, *Bien Hoa*, and *My Tho*, where France recognized private property rights based on traditional writing of the local people, in Cochinchina the land ownership was already partially established. Those people, who held regular titles, enjoyed all the privileges granted to property owners in France, including the rights to sell, donate, exchange, and mortgage, under the terms and conditions prescribed by law or determined by local customs [Garnier 1865, 338].

The situation in the Southwestern Cochinchina shows many peculiarities due to the almost undefined private ownership regime in some areas: “However, landed property did not exist everywhere in the new provinces as it was already established in the old ones; thus, in the *Ba Xuyen* (under the inspection of *Soc Trang*), landed property did not exist at all” [Garnier 1865, 332]. Land is often cultivated communally, resubdivided annually according to the agricultural production cycle, which presents numerous obstacles to

establishing personal ownership. To address the above situation, the French colonial government issued a series of administrative documents to develop a legal framework for expanding the cultivation area and introducing private ownership.

Table 1
Legal documents related to land in Cochinchina in the period 1862–1925

Time	Legal documents	Promulgating Agency	The main purpose related to the private ownership of the land
February 20, 1862	Decree	Colonial Government	Stipulating the auction of “unowned” property left in wartime, creating conditions for colonists to buy land cheaply: “The Decree dated 20 February 1862, which put vacant properties up for auction for sale, at the price of one sou per square meter” [Tho 1996, 53].
March 3, 1863	Local Decrees	Local Government	Declaring the land property abandoned by the rebels to be public property belonging to the State: “All landed properties abandoned by the rebels at the moment when French troops took possession of Cochinchina, and which became public property by virtue of the local decrees of 3 and 7 March 1863” [Garnier 1865, 366].
March 7, 1863			
May 16, 1863	Decree	Colonial Government	Allowing peasants to exchange old ownership papers for French papers for additional legal guarantees: “The first dates from 16 May 1863; its purpose was to authorize any Annamite cultivator to exchange his property title for a French title, which was intended to provide him with greater guarantees” [Garnier 1865, 334].
March 30, 1865	Decision	Colonial Government	Stipulating that land belonging to the State shall be ceded at a fixed price, not less than 10 francs per hectare: “...the lands belonging to the State shall be granted at fixed prices, which may not be lower than 10 francs per hectare” [Garnier 1865, 335].
December 29, 1871	Decree	Colonial Government	Determining the conditions for becoming a land buyer at 10 francs per hectare. Article 12 states: “No alienation of public property may be made unless authorized by the Governor in Privy Council, who determines the allocation of land to be sold, the time, the price, and the conditions of the sale. This land may be alienated by auction, private sale, exchange, and free grants, etc.” [Paris 1896, 16–18].
November 11, 1878	Decree	Colonial Government	Determining the conditions under which individuals could become owners of uncultivated lands in the entire colonial territory [Enjoÿ 1898, 367].
August 22, 1882	Local Decrees	Governor of Cochinchina	Regulations on the transfer of public lands in Cochinchina [Cochinchina Governor’s Palace, File No. 35929].
October 15, 1890			
October 13, 1910			
January 15, 1903	Decree of the Governor-General	Governor General of Indochina	Regulations on the reorganization of the Public Property Management Agency in Indochina [Beau 1908, 189].
July 22, 1905	Decree of the Governor-General	Governor General of Indochina	Provincial administrators were entitled to directly transfer no more than 10 hectares of abandoned rural land (previously 20 hectares). The part that exceeded the limit must be approved by the superior authorities [Boudillon 1915, 51–52].
October 20, 1911			

August 22, 1913	Decree of the Governor-General	Governor General of Indochina	Regulations on the regime of agricultural land concession were reformed and the regulation of real estate assets was adjusted according to the general decree, applicable throughout Indochina [Exposition Internationale de Lyon 1914, 93–95].
October 25, 1913			
December 27, 1913			
July 21, 1925	Decree	President of the French Republic	Comprehensive codification of the regime of real property ownership in order to establish the land ownership regime in Cochinchina, and at the same time consolidate and develop the policy of large land ownership of the landlord class, replacing registration on the tax book with the issuance of official ownership documents [Ministère des colonies... 1925, 1092].

The process of French colonialism establishing private ownership of land in Cochinchina was a complex and lengthy one, clearly reflecting the way in which the colonial government gradually imposed a Western capitalist model of land ownership on a socio-agricultural space that operated according to the customs and structures of traditional Vietnamese villages. This process can be divided into two main stages:

From 1862 to the end of the 19th century, this was the period of establishing the legal foundation and the mechanism of possession. The process of establishing private ownership of land in Cochinchina was closely tied to the French colonialists' policy of legitimizing their occupation. After the Treaty of Saigon [Treaty of *Nham Tuat*] (1862), when the three eastern provinces fell to the French, the colonial government temporarily recognized the land ownership documents of the natives in accordance with the laws of Annam. However, in just a few years, France had issued a series of decrees to restructure the ownership regime in favor of Europeans. The decree of February 20, 1862, allowed the auction of “unowned” properties, including land abandoned or confiscated during the war, at a bargain price, paving the way for large-scale acquisition by private French and religious organizations.

Subsequently, the decree of May 16, 1863, allowed the Annamese to adjust their old papers to the French form, nominally to “increase legal security” but in fact to initially put the entire land under the control of the colonial government. By the decree of July 30, 1877, the establishment of *Bureau de la Conservation de la propriété foncière* (The Office for the Conservation of Landed Property) [Paris 1896, 24] marked the process of legalizing the measurement, registration, and transfer, thereby creating a legal premise for the expropriation and concentration of land in the hands of a minority of French owners and native minions.

From the beginning of the 20th century to 1925, the consolidation and refinement of the codification and regulation of private property rights under French civil law took place. Before 1925, provisions on fundamental property rights were scattered across numerous decrees and administrative decisions, resulting in overlap and inadequacy. To remedy this situation, the Decree of July 21, 1925, *Décret fixant les règles relatives au régime de la propriété foncière en Cochinchine* (Decree establishing the rules governing land property in Cochinchina), was promulgated, marking the completion of the process of codifying the land property regime in Cochinchina.

The 1925 decree stipulated that the entire French territory of Cochinchina would apply a standard regime for immovable property and related rights, regardless of the holder's status. According to this Decree, Article 4 lists the fundamental property rights that were recognized: ownership, usufruct rights, use and residence rights, long-term lease

rights, servitudes, mortgages, and mortgages of real estate. At the same time, Article 11 also clearly affirmed: “Private individuals and legal entities governed by private law have full discretion over the property and rights belonging to them, provided that their actions comply with the provisions of this decree” [Ministère des colonies... 1925, 1096–1110]. From here, ownership was defined as the right to enjoy and use property in an absolute way, except for the limitations prescribed by law. This significantly strengthened the private ownership regime, particularly large-scale ownership in Cochinchina in general, and especially in newly exploited areas in the Southwestern Cochinchina.

With these regulations, France fully adopted the European model of private ownership in an Eastern agrarian society. In essence, the 1925 decree was not only a legal document but also a political and economic tool to legitimize the land structure established during the colonial era. It guaranteed legal security for large capitalists and landowners, promoting the use of credit and mortgages in the agricultural economy. However, while expanding the capacity to own and accumulate land for the minority, this law pushed most farmers into a state of dependency and loss of access to land.

Thus, France established a legal mechanism to transform Cochinchina into a capitalist agricultural colony, where private property rights were guaranteed under French law, promoting the process of land accumulation and large-scale economic exploitation, mainly serving the interests of the French landlord class and colonialism. At the same time, the legal mechanism of private ownership of land in the Southwestern Cochinchina also contributed to the formation of a new social structure, in which the interests of the landlord class are put first, while most peasants were excluded from the process of legalizing their rights, leading to deepening inequality in the rural society of Cochinchina during the colonial era.

The Process of Forming Significant Land Ownership in the Southwestern Cochinchina

From the beginning of the French colonialists’ invasion of Vietnam, they paid special attention to the issue of agriculture. In particular, the acquisition of land was considered a significant goal. All policies were designed to maximize the benefits of agriculture, particularly low-cost but high-profit rice, serving both the country’s needs and the goal of strengthening the colonial ruling apparatus. Based on that general policy, the French colonialists, considering the natural, social, and historical characteristics of each region, established separate policies tailored to each area.

In the Southwestern Cochinchina, where many areas of fertile alluvial land remained unexplored, it soon became a strategic target in the process of transforming Cochinchina into a French colony of exploitation. To accelerate the process of expanding the area of cultivated land, “from the very first years of the French occupation, the administration, to promote agriculture, issued several decrees concerning the recognition and establishment of rural landed property” [Cochinchine française Gouvernement 1880, 333].

However, most of the land in the Southwestern Cochinchina was low-lying, flooded, and irrigation was complex. The French colonialists soon realized the essential role of building infrastructure, especially dredging works and building new canals for agricultural exploitation. After the Treaty of Patenôtre (1884)⁴ [Bouinai, Paulus 1886, 73–75], the pace of canal digging increased rapidly: in just the following decade (1884–1894), more than 2.1 million m³ of land were dug up, creating an additional 169,000 hectares of fields [Sử 1999, 107]. Lands in the Southwestern region of Cochinchina, such as *Can Tho*, *Soc Trang*, *Phung Hiep*, *Rach Gia*, and *Ha Tien*, formed a dense network of canals.

Since Paul Doumer became Governor General (1897), colonial infrastructure policy entered a new stage with the slogan “the age of iron and the age of bridges in the colony” [Devillers 2006, 594]; Doumer paid special attention to the development of water

transport in the Southwestern Cochinchina as a tool to strengthen administrative control, economic exploitation, and promotion of the circulation of goods – mainly rice. In the 1890s–1900s, the volume of excavated soil reached 824,000 m³/year, increasing to 7.2 million m³/year between 1920 and 1930, with more than 1,300 km of main canals and 2,500 km of secondary canals completed [Anh 2008, 166].

On the basis of the above analysis, we see that French colonial exploitation policies in Southwestern Cochinchina exhibited a clearly dual character. On the one hand, through the establishment of a legal framework for land ownership and substantial investment in irrigation infrastructure, particularly canal networks, the colonial administration promoted large-scale land reclamation, rapidly expanded cultivated areas, and facilitated the emergence of a commercial rice-producing region, turning Southwestern Cochinchina into the rice granary of Indochina. On the other hand, this process unfolded within the logic of colonial exploitation, leading to increased land concentration, the erosion of traditional ownership structures, and profound social stratification in rural areas. Therefore, alongside achievements in agricultural expansion, these policies also laid the foundation for enduring inequalities and social tensions in the region.

This system not only expanded the area of cultivation and land improvement but also promoted the formation of large plantations, creating a foundation for Southwestern Cochinchina to become the central rice granary in colonial exploitation. At the same time, it profoundly changed the structure of land ownership and use. The acceleration of the process of reclaiming wasteland initially also brought positive results, with the area of cultivated land expanding rapidly. The five-year statistics from the period 1899–1904 on the decline of wasteland in *Long Xuyen* province, one of the localities in the Southwestern Cochinchina, showed this.

Table 2
Wasteland area and its ratio compared to the total land area
in *Long Xuyen* during the period 1899–1929

Year	Wasteland area (ha)	Ratio to Total Area (%)
1899	210.558,71	80,6
1904	199.797,58	76,7
1909	186.276,11	73,1
1914	179.664,00	68,8
1919	157.258,85	60,2
1924	106.286,55	40,7
1929	67.590,30	25,8

Source: [Duvernoy 1930, 35]

The above statistics also shows a significant change in the land structure in *Long Xuyen* province. Within three decades (1899–1929), the area of wasteland plummeted from 210,558.71 hectares to 67,590 hectares, corresponding to a rate from 80.6 % to 25.8 % of the total land area of the province. Considering the milestone of 1914, in the first 15 years, the land area cleared was still limited, with an average of only about 2,059 hectares cleared per year. However, between 1914 and 1929, there was a rapid increase in cleared land, as the wasteland decreased from 179,664 hectares to 67,590.30 hectares. This meant that an average of approximately 7,471 hectares of land was removed each year, more than three and a half times the rate of the period from 1899 to 1914. The difference in the process of clearing wasteland between the above two stages was also compatible with the phased development of dredging and construction of irrigation facilities in Southwestern Cochinchina by the French colonialists.

To accelerate the process of colonial exploitation based on land and agricultural resources, a “legal barrier” was established, facilitating the privatization of land in the area. When the pacification was completed in 1871 [Bouinai, Paulus 1886, 343–348], the Decree of December 29, 1871 issued by the Governor of Cochinchina in order to prescribe new principles for the transfer of public property stated:

It is stated as follows: Article 12: No alienation of domanial property may be effected unless it has been authorized by the Governor, in the Privy Council, who determines the subdivision of the lands to be sold, as well as the time, price, and conditions of sale. These lands may be alienated by means of public auction, private sale, exchange, or by way of free concessions, etc. [Garnier 1865, 335].

Subsequently, a series of laws was developed and applied (see Table 1) that created a legal framework for the purchase and sale of reclaimed land, thereby facilitating the acquisition of land by wealthy individuals and large-scale landowners.

In fact, the organization of selling land to people in an emergency, turning land into a commodity to be put into business, led to the situation that the previous emergency process was broken, and the land fund that had been urgently claimed was placed under protection. Nominally, the private sector was still allowed to make emergency purchases. Still, it had to comply with regulations on bidding under the management of the principal investor, the colonial government, to achieve large-scale land trading [Binh 1995, 38]. This activity was called the “land transfer regime” by the colonial government, with the definition: “The civilizing enterprise in this land laid the foundation for defining land ownership rights, while at the same time safeguarding the interests of the community (?) as well as the public assets subject to transfer” [Quang 2000, 80]. But in fact, it was a blatant deprivation of land from the hands of the peasants by the French colonialists.

From the above decrees, it is possible to briefly outline the process of appropriation and profit from the land business as follows: Through the transfer, the buyer would carry out the procedures for transferring the land, the ownership contract clearly stated the estimated number of land plots to be established, the land buyer must pay the registration fee (to be named in the ministry) at the listed price of 5 francs/ha and the land purchase money was spent for 2 years (in case of failure to pay, the land transfer process was re-evaluated from the beginning, except for cases appointed by the State) [Cochinchine française Gouvernement 1880, 335]. Thus, the process of land privatization in Cochinchina, particularly the vast and fertile land in the Southwestern Cochinchina, gradually developed based on a combination of administrative tools, colonial legal mechanisms, and political and economic interests, which were secured through large-scale land ownership.

To strengthen the legal “fence” as well as to break the limit on the area of ownership, the colonial government issued a Decree dated December 27, 1913, of the Governor General of Indochina, which determined that if they want to apply for the transfer of agricultural land, they must pay through public bidding or the parties agree to buy and sell. The transferred land area is no longer limited to a maximum size of less than 300 acres [Exposition Internationale de Lyon 1914, 95–96]. Additionally, from 1913 onwards, the grant and transfer of land areas without payment became a separate issue, and if there was one, it was only a small area (20 acres); therefore, selling land through auction or buying and selling was the dominant method. From here, the colonial government paved the way for people with money, human and material resources in society to occupy a large area of land, and especially the colonial component (who did not have too much capital) naturally became the owners of a vast area of land. This is also one of the distinct features of the scale and area of land ownership in Southwestern Cochinchina under French colonialism.

Table 3
Land transfer situation in *Chau Doc* province from 1912 to 1916

Year	Less than 10 hectares		Over 10 hectares		Recognized area (ha)	Number of contractual certificates granted
	Number of land transfer applications	Area (ha)	Number of land transfer applications	Area (ha)		
1912	1.708	9.451	14	953	2.282	945
1913	3.787	15.855	30	2.290	2.796	845
1914	2.419	8.945	52	2.038	5.239	1.016
1915	2.164	10.954	49	2.320	2.113	1.840
1916	2.199	9.505	70	3.357	1.534	216
In total	12.250	71.715	215	10.958	13.964	4.862

Source: [Situation économique...]

Table 3 provides an overview of the land transfer process in *Chau Doc* province. Firstly, there was a deep divergence in access to land, with more than 12,000 applications for land under 10 hectares accounting for 98.3 % of the total number of applications. In comparison, only 215 applications for land plots over 10 hectares accounted for 13 % of the total land concession area, indicating that only a minority could accumulate large areas of land. Secondly, the low proportion of land recognized and granted contracts (only 17 % of the application area and 39 % of the applications) reflected a strict screening mechanism to limit the real ownership of the indigenous people. Third, this disparity revealed that the colonial government encouraged reclamation but tightly controlled ownership, thereby creating conditions that favoured the pro-French landlord class while hindering the formation of mass ownership.

The expansion and soaring increase in the newly explored land area in the Southwestern Cochinchina raised the issue of the need for consistent, transparent, and clear regulation on land ownership, especially for the large landlord class, to protect the interests of this social force. The decree of July 21, 1925 “fixing the rules on the land ownership regime in Cochinchina” [Trung 1988, 64] was promulgated by the colonial government to affirm the principle of “freedom” in land ownership: “Private individuals and judicial legal entities are free to use the property under their ownership, however they must comply with the provisions of this Decree” [Trung 1988, 65] and at the same time re-stabilize the private ownership of land in Cochinchina. Accordingly, it clearly stipulated specific conditions on the sale, ransom, and transfer of land, and there is absolutely no limit on the number and area of land plots in the prescribed ownership. Because according to the colonial government, “the owner is not bound by the regulations on the number of lands owned” [Trung 1988, 65]. In fact, the above regulations not only created favourable conditions for the landlord class to acquire land but also facilitated the development of large-scale land ownership.

By 1927, the colonial government had surveyed land transfers and occupations in Cochinchina. According to the statistics, it is evident that most of the Southwestern Cochinchina provinces transferred land areas, and there was a notable difference in the average area of each estate (see Table 4). The provinces in the newly exploited area had large transferred land area and the average area of each large estate. However, in *Chau Doc* province, the average size of small estates remained relatively limited compared to other provinces, mainly due to unfavorable natural conditions such as mountainous terrain, seasonal flooding, and a less developed canal system, which constrained large-scale land accumulation [Cochinchina Governor’s Palace 1913].

Table 4
Land area transferred by provinces in the Southwestern Cochinchina in 1927

Unit: hectare (ha)

Province	Transfer area	Average area per estate
Long Xuyen	64.000	16,10
Chau Doc	123.000	3,10
Rach Gia	237.000	10,00
Bac Lieu	230.000	12,10

Source: [Comparaison de la situation... 1930]

To fully exploit the revenue from the land and complete its land grab, the colonial government targeted the public land sector. It issued regulations governing the transfer of this type of land. The decree of November 4, 1928, deprived people with low incomes of their last hope for the means of production – public land in their already meager villages. This mechanism not only put public land under centralized administrative control, but also created a preference for large landlords or powerful foreigners. At the same time, this eliminated the remaining limited public land available to people with low incomes, pushing them into a situation where they lost their land, their livelihood rights, and closed the vicious cycle of dependency – proletariat – inequality in the Southwestern Cochinchina countryside.

Table 5
Agricultural land area in the Southwestern Cochinchina provinces in 1930

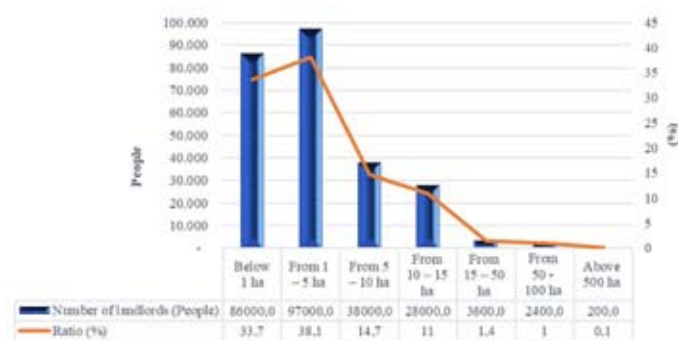
Unit: hectare (ha)

Province	1920	1930	Increased area
Bac Lieu	176.778	330.030	153.252
Can Tho	202.117	205.000	2.883
Chau Doc	111.637	114.925	3.288
Ha Tien	2.500	3.978	1.478
Long Xuyen	131.442	186.049	54.607
Rach Gia	228.478	358.900	130.422
Soc Trang	188.131	212.909	24.778

Source: [Comparaison de la situation... 1930]

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the process of land concentration in Cochinchina had become increasingly evident, with a notable increase occurring in the 1920s and 1930s. One of the most characteristic manifestations of agricultural colonization in Cochinchina was the increasing concentration of land in the hands of a minority of wealthy landowners.

Chart 1
Distribution of the number of landowners according to the area of land owned in Cochinchina (1930–1931)

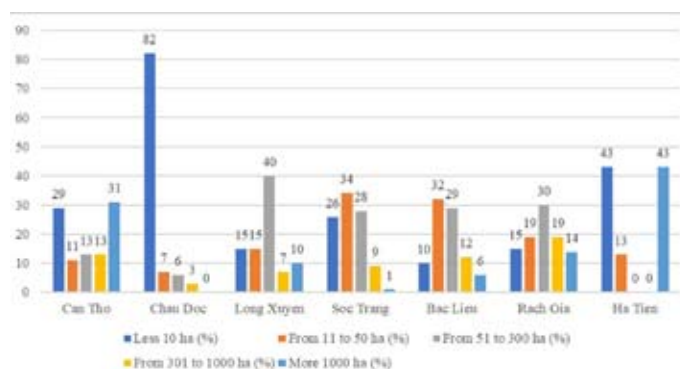


Source: [Huân, Hà 2017, 226]

From the Chart of landowners' distribution by ownership area in Cochinchina (1930–1931), the difference in ownership rates between groups is evident. The landowner class, which spans 5 to 500 hectares, despite accounting for only 27.1 % of the total, holds up to 45 % of the total arable land area. In contrast, the group of smallholder plantations, with owners of less than 5 hectares, accounting for more than half of the number of landowners (183,000 people, equivalent to 71.8 %), only occupied about 15 % of the land area. Notably, the class of large landowners (from 50 to 100 hectares) accounted for a tiny proportion (1 %, equivalent to about 2,400 people), yet controlled a considerable volume of land, even more than 200 people holding an area exceeding 500 hectares. These figures reflect the deep inequality in the land ownership structure in Cochinchina.

Particularly in the Southwestern Cochinchina, which is considered a key area of colonial exploitation under French colonialism, the situation became even more apparent. The chart of the proportion of land concession area in the Southwestern Cochinchina provinces in 1930 shows that many localities have a superior proportion of large-scale land concessions. In Chau Doc, the concession area, which spans over 1,000 hectares, accounted for 82 %, while the area of less than 10 hectares made up only 7 %. Similarly, provinces such as *Long Xuyen* (40 %), *Soc Trang* (34 %), *Bac Lieu* (32 %), and *Rach Gia* (30 %) all had high land concession rates of 301–1,000 hectares (see Chart 2). The above data reflect the deep divergence of land concession policy, which tends to favor a small part of the influential class and excludes most indigenous farmers from accessing land.

Chart 2
The distribution of cultivated land area by ownership size in Southwestern Cochinchina, 1930



Source: [Comparaison de la situation... 1930]

Table 6
Land ownership of native landowners in the provinces in the Southwestern Cochinchina in 1936

Province	Less than 5 hectares	6–10	11–20	21–50	51–100	101–150	151–200	201–250	251–300	301–400	401–500	501–750	751–1000	1001–1500	1501–2000	2001–4000	Over 4000	In total
Can Tho	12.581	2.733	1.295	813	303	107	29	21	15	16	10	9	2	2	0	1	0	17.937
Chau Doc	25.158	2.559	1.008	359	118	288	12	11	9	3	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	29.629
Long Xuyen	11.314	2.574	1.461	831	244	71	37	23	19	15	6	13	5	1	1	0	0	16.615
Soc Trang	6.592	2.243	1.468	736	199	87	50	28	23	22	14	17	5	2	4	3	0	11.193
Bac Lieu	6.966	2.929	1.808	1.119	411	148	70	34	31	27	17	25	14	5	10	1	3	13.618
Rach Gia	8.394	4.152	2.236	1.493	686	248	130	91	91	70	35	37	14	10	6	3	1	17.967
Ha Tien	5.293	334	74	8	4	5	2	–	–	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5.721
In total	76.298	17.524	9.350	2749.612	1965	954	330	208	188	154	84	103	40	20	21	8	4	112.68

Unit: hectares (ha)
Source: [Quang 2000, 266]

Based on the actual data and conditions of Southwestern Cochinchina, it is evident that the general picture of land ownership stratification is very complicated and uneven across localities. At the same time, it reflects the profound disparity in the rural economic structure in the Southwestern provinces of Cochinchina under the colonial period. It stands out with some of the following characteristics:

Chau Doc province was a typical case of the phenomenon of smallholder plantations being overwhelming, with the concession area of less than 10 hectares accounting for 82 %. In comparison, groups of 51 hectares or more are almost absent. For a new mining area like *Chau Doc* province, this was a unique phenomenon because it was the only province that didn't exhibit the characteristics of the above plantations, despite having a relatively high area of land reclaimed and transferred (see Table 2). The area of estates was also small (3.1 hectares) when considered in the actual overview of the Southwestern Cochinchina provinces. This showed that a structure of land ownership was dispersed, small-scale, stemming from long-standing population factors, specific geographical location, and rugged terrain that "made French, Vietnamese capitalists, or landowners with money afraid to invest in this land. *Chau Doc* could not attract capitalist forces; rich landowners invested capital to reclaim and establish plantations" [Hồng 1997, 54].

Long Xuyen province was a case that clearly showed the maximum concentration of land, in stark contrast to the phenomenon of overwhelmingly smallholder plantations in the distribution of land area in *Chau Doc*. With 40 % of the area in the hands of landowners owning between 51 and 300 hectares, the highest in the Southwestern Cochinchina provinces, this reflects the dominance of large landowners and the profound impact of large-scale land concession policies. According to statistics up to 1929, the number of large landowners over 50 hectares was 559 people (accounting for 4.83 %), corresponding to about 0.02 % of the population but owning 58.8 % of the province's cultivated land (about 113,755 hectares) [Duvernoy 1930, 38]. The process of reclaiming, transfer policies and natural conditions were among the factors affecting the severe imbalance in land ownership in the province, as most of the province's land area was still in a state of desolation, the land was relatively flat, thereby facilitating the establishment of large estates. Especially now "rich people, investing capital to reclaim, they always find a way to transfer plantations to others to sign profits" [Hồng 1997, 43] were significantly supported by the colonial government, because to be granted ownership, the buyer must pay a tax to the government after each transfer.

Provinces such as *Can Tho* and *Ha Tien*, although they had differences in conditions, time, and the process of emergencies, shared the same characteristics in land ownership distribution. The polarization was evident when there was both a high proportion of land plots of less than 10 hectares (29 % and 43 %, respectively) and a substantial proportion of land plots exceeding 1,000 hectares in both provinces. The rupture in the intermediate strata (especially when *Ha Tien* did not have a group of 51, less than 1000 hectares) showed the reality of land development in the direction of strong differentiation, in which the middle class of landlords was almost eliminated or not clearly formed. *Can Tho* province can be a densely populated land reclamation area; most of the land had been reclaimed and exploited before. Therefore, the remaining wasteland area was relatively small, along with the inheritance of assets, which resulted in a situation of small, fragmented land. However, with its location in the center of the region and extremely favorable natural conditions, this place attracted people with powerful material resources, leading to the purchase, sale, and acquisition of small plots of land to establish large private estates. By 1930, the land area in *Can Tho* accounted for 51.7 %, but the number of farmers was only 4.3 % [Henry 1932, 189].

In *Ha Tien* province, this process occurred separately because, until the French colonialists invaded and exploited the colony, the area was still largely unexploited. It was a vast land with a sparse population and located in a border area, resulting in differences in

the scale of land ownership. Approximately 43 % of the concession area was less than 10 hectares, and the province was formed primarily as people urgently sought land to make a living during a time of change. Along with the immigrant workforce, materialistic owners in society also contributed to shaping this ownership regime, in large or small areas, depending on their ability to hire emergency workers. The phenomenon of large European colonial ownership was a significant feature of the province, mainly due to the favors and privileges granted by the colonial government. Therefore, the landlord class was born along with the process of land exploitation and occupation by self-farming peasants and shaped the land ownership structure of Ha Tien with “European colonialists wanting to be the owners of large plots of land from a few hundred to one, two thousand hectares, no Annamese has 10 hectares” [Gouvernement Général l’Indochine 1912, 236].

Meanwhile, *Bac Lieu* and *Rach Gia* stood out for their high land concentration in the middle and large plantation groups, with the group from 51 to 1,000 hectares accounting for 41 % of the area in *Bac Lieu* and 49 % in *Rach Gia*. These were typical localities for intense land commercialization, thanks to favourable natural conditions, a network of canals, and support from colonial administrative policies. In these two provinces, people saw the presence of large landowners with “straight-winged storks” fields, such as those of Mr. Tran Trinh Trach in *Bac Lieu* (17,000 hectares), Mr. Huynh Thien Loc in *Rach Gia* (12,000 hectares) [Đĩnh 1970, 86]. Especially in *Rach Gia*, according to the statistics on the number of farm owners, there were a total of 17,697 farmers in the province, of which 12,546 were small owners with less than 10 hectares, and the concession area accounted for 15 % [Đương 1997, 141–142]. Although they were superior in numbers, their economic power was relatively weak; most of them were only small or medium-sized farmers. On the contrary, the larger the area of land ownership, the smaller the number of landowners, which was a testament to the intense concentration of land in the hands of a few people⁵ [Đương 1997, 142]. In this ownership structure, there was also the appearance of French landowners, such as “the colonists Jean Baze and Mayer are not only famous for their great landowners in *Rach Gia* but also famous for owning many farmlands in *Bac Lieu*, *Soc Trang*, *Ha Tien*, *Can Tho*” [Đương 1997, 144].

A notable intermediate case was *Soc Trang*, with a concentration mainly in the middle plantation group: 11–50 hectares (34 %) and 51–300 hectares (28 %). This was a manifestation of a relatively more balanced land structure, where fragmentation and concentration co-occur, but it did not lead to extremes. Before the French colonialists invaded and exploited this area, this place stood out for “the existence of rural communes (phum, squirrels) based on the Khmer land ownership regime” [Mai 1998, 106] and the process of reclamation by exiles. Later, the colonial government’s land business policies and objectives broke the stability of the province’s land ownership structure. In addition to the landowners who had “blood” in the government apparatus who were granted an area of over 1,000 hectares, there were also many landowners who owned a large amount of land, especially in *Khmer* villages, where landowners accounted for more than 90 % of the area [Tinh uỷ Sóc Trăng 1994, 32].

A notable feature of *Soc Trang* province was the presence of many European landowners. According to statistics, by 1936, the entire province had 70 European landowners, who accounted for 29,052 hectares of land, or approximately 15 % of the cultivated area. The remaining 85 % of the area was in the hands of 11,620 native landowners, who possessed 177,000 hectares of land. Owning communal public works occupied a very modest area; about 8,600 hectares of public land were managed by the commune, and this was also an essential source of revenue and expenditure in local activities.

It should also be noted that there was a clear disparity between Vietnamese and French landowners, as evidenced by data from Long Xuyên. In 1929, out of a total population of 223,645, there were only 115 Europeans compared to 217,300 Vietnamese. Notably, the number of individuals registered in the village land records and holding land amounted to

approximately 3,238 [Duvernoy 1930, 38–40]. These figures indicate that Vietnamese landowners overwhelmingly dominated in terms of numbers. However, in terms of scale, although fewer in number, French landowners controlled large concessionary estates, while a segment of Vietnamese landowners including those who had acquired French citizenship, also participated in large-scale land accumulation. This demonstrates that the structure of land ownership was highly stratified, reflecting the interaction between indigenous elements.

Considering the overall landscape of the Southwestern Cochinchina, the chart reflects a high degree of differentiation in land ownership, ranging from fragmented small plantations to vast large estates, especially the increasingly prominent presence of a large class of landowners with ownership areas exceeding 1,000 hectares. A large class of landowners, including the French and a small part of the pro-French Vietnamese, with the ability to own land on a large scale, was formed and consolidated. The application of policies such as land concessions, public land auctions, nationalization of unowned land, and registration of ownership has created favourable legal conditions for the formation of significant land ownership in Southwestern Cochinchina. As a result, a stratified colonial rural structure was formed in the Southwestern Cochinchina: on the one hand, a minority of plantations owned hundreds or even thousands of hectares of land; on the other hand, most farmers owned little or no land, depending on the landowner through the form of farming between landowners and tenants.

From the above situation, it can be affirmed that the process of privatizing private land in Southwestern Cochinchina was not only an inevitable result of the colonial exploitation policy but also deeply reflected the changes in production relations and rural socio-economic structures in the context of colonization. It was the concentration of land and property inequality that formed the basis for the class conflicts and peasant struggle movements in the Southwestern Cochinchina.

Impacts of Land Privatization on the Socio-Economic Situation in the Southwestern Cochinchina

The privatization of land under French colonialism not only profoundly transformed the structure of land ownership in the Southwestern Cochinchina but also led to long-term social and economic consequences for the region. The legal mechanism of the colonial government, with its system of contractual titles, public land auctions, and regulations on the legalization of private ownership, created conditions that allowed a minimal number of people with economic means or connections with the colonial government to occupy most of the land area. As a result, the clear formation of a stratified, asymmetrical, and dependent rural social structure did not help ensure that “all people have the right to own land” [Mai 1998, 163], as painted and propagated by the French colonialists.

Economically, France’s colonial exploitation policy profoundly transformed the economic structure of the Southwestern Cochinchina. In agriculture, France maintained the traditional feudal exploitation method (land, farming) and applied the capitalist exploitation mechanism (expansion of plantations, infrastructure investment) [Lâm 2010, 122]. This combination created a distinctive colonial exploitation mechanism, ensuring super-profits for France while maintaining the dependence of peasants. Traditional small-scale production was disrupted and replaced by a centralized production model for export. Rice in Cochinchina, especially in the Southwestern Cochinchina, became a strategic commodity in international trade; however, this led to the impoverishment of the planters, as they lost their land autonomy and were subjected to double oppression from both landowners and plantation owners.

Southwestern Cochinchina’s industry developed slowly, mainly associated with agriculture. The rice milling industry emerged strongly to serve the export market, leading to

a shift in production facilities to the southwestern region of Cochinchina. Some industries, such as beer and beverages in *Can Tho*, also emerged, reflecting the trend of urbanization; however, the industry was still dependent, only stopping at preliminary processing and not creating independent production.

France held a monopoly on foreign trade, turning Cochinchina into a market dependent on the country. At the same time, domestic trade underwent significant changes with the emergence of the Vietnamese and Chinese merchant classes, the development of rice farming systems, and the formation of trading centers such as *Can Tho*, *Tra On*, *Cau Ke*, and *Phung Hiep*. *Can Tho* has become the economic hub of the entire region, and the floating market has become a unique symbol of the economy and culture of Southwestern Cochinchina along the river.

In terms of society, the changes in Cochinchina under French colonization were closely associated with land policy and colonial exploitation mechanisms. The rural social structure was deeply differentiated. A new class of landlords emerged, most of whom were connected to the colonial government or had become wealthy through land privileges. They became an intermediary force between the colonists and the native peasants, holding large volumes of arable land and directly dominating agricultural life. On the contrary, most farmers became tenants, dependent on land rents that were often exorbitant, and frequently fell into poverty and debt.

This differentiation also led to social instability. Land litigation and disputes over land use rights were common, reflecting the sharp conflicts between landlords and tenants, as well as between peasants and the colonial government. In addition, traditional social institutions such as villages and towns were gradually eroded, replaced by a bureaucratic colonial administrative apparatus that directly served the goal of control. Rural community relations, which were based on mutual assistance and cohesion, were also disrupted, replaced by strict economic and legal interests. France's land policy not only altered the economic foundation but also created a profound distortion in the social structure of the Southwestern Cochinchina, resulting in numerous consequences.

According to statistics from 1930, Cochinchina had approximately 255,000 landowners from among nearly 4 million people of the total population, owning a total of 2.4 million acres of land; on average, each landowner held 9.5 acres of land [Henry 1932, 146]. However, the distribution was very non-uniform: 71 % of landowners owned less than 5 acres each, belonging to the small landowner group and controlling less than 13 % of the cultivated area. In contrast, only 2.5 % of landowners belonged to the large landowner class but accounted for 45 % of the land [Duong 1967, 109]. The above situation revealed a high concentration of land ownership, where land power was concentrated in the hands of a privileged minority with political and economic privileges, resulting in a manipulated land market and a clearly differentiated rural society.

Compared to Tonkin, where the traditional village structure was still maintained, land was shared in the community through the system of public land and incense. The Southwestern Cochinchina clearly showed the individualization of ownership and the breakdown of traditional community structures. At the same time, Tonkin had 965,000 landowners among 6.5 million rural people, with an average of only 1.2 acres per person, showing the relative universality of small ownership [Duong 1967, 108]. According to P. Gourou, an industry with an area of 1.08 acres or more, which was considered an average class in Tonkin, was only regarded as a small industry in Southwestern Cochinchina. It was mainly because in the opinion of the medium and agricultural class in this area, it was necessary to own 5 acres or more. Therefore, less than 1 acre of property was considered insignificant, and the owner was classified as proletarian [Gourou 1936, 273]. This was also one of the reasons why 2/3 of the families were proletarian according to the statistics of the ruling government in 1930 [Duong 1967, 108].

Conclusions

The study of land privatization in Southwestern Cochinchina (1867–1940) clearly reveals the nature of colonial exploitation policy and reflects the systematic intervention of French colonialists in the traditional land ownership structure. Through the establishment of legal mechanisms, the construction of local systems, and the imposition of decrees related to land, the colonial government transformed land into a kind of property that could be bought, sold, transferred, mortgaged, and accumulated in accordance with Western law. The result was the concentration of land in the hands of a small group of large landowners, both French and Vietnamese, while most of the peasants were pushed into the status of tenants, dependent and impoverished.

As a result, the severe imbalance in the distribution and ownership of land in Southwestern Cochinchina had a significant impact on the region's economic structure. The rate of urgency and the expansion of rice cultivation areas increased and created a premise for the industry and trade in the region to undergo new developments, revolving around agricultural products as the primary focus, while also being dependent on the regulatory process and management mechanisms of the colonial government.

In addition to the economic impact, this process also profoundly transformed the social structure of the Southwestern Cochinchina. The landlord class emerged as a force closely linked to the colonial government, becoming a socio-political support for the exploitation process. Meanwhile, farmers, who had traditionally formed the social foundation, were deprived of their land, becoming a cheap labor force for rice production and export. The colonial exploitation mechanism, therefore, combined both feudal and capitalist elements, creating a specific socio-economic form.

By analyzing the process of land privatization in the Southwestern Cochinchina (1867–1940), the study not only contributes to better identifying the French land policy in Vietnam, but also helps to explain the origins of the acute social conflicts in the South in the first half of the twentieth century – an important factor that led to the rise of the patriotic movement in the country and the later revolution. This is also the basis for continuing to study the relationship between land ownership, class structure, and Vietnam's socio-historical process.

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¹ During the French colonial period, the term Cochinchina referred to the entire southern region of present-day Vietnam. According to the 1899 Decree of the Governor General of Indochina, Cochinchina was divided into three regions: East, Central, and West. In this system, the “Southwestern Cochinchina” corresponds to the Mekong Delta, comprising provinces such as *Chau Doc*, *Long Xuyen*, *Ha Tien*, *Rach Gia*, *Soc Trang*, *Bac Lieu*, and *Can Tho* [Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine, 1936].

² The term “landed estate” is a concept with a long history in Vietnam, referring to large tracts of privately owned land that are typically organized for farmers to cultivate. During the French colonial period (after 1867), this concept corresponded to a plantation or concession agricultural in colonial administration, reflecting the continuity between feudal estates and capitalist plantations, where landowners took possession, and peasants became tenants or hired laborers.

³ In 1867, Admiral La Grandière decided to advance into *Vinh Long*, *Chau Doc*, and *Ha Tien* without encountering almost any resistance. Ambassador Phan Thanh Gian chose the path of

suicide, and from here, the whole of Cochinchina officially fell into French hands [Lhomme 1901, 21].

⁴ After the *Bac-Lé* incident (June 1884), where the French suffered heavy losses when clashing with the Qing dynasty army, Franco-Chinese relations completely broke down. The French government authorized Ambassador Patenôtre in Beijing to demand an apology and compensation and assigned Admiral Courbet to command the entire French navy in the Far East, threatening Chinese ports. In this context, Patenôtre was sent to *Hue* to negotiate the adjustment of the Treaty of Harmand (1883). Due to the resistance of the ministers, the French sent an ultimatum to force the royal court to sign the Treaty of June 6, 1884, commonly known as the Treaty of Patenôtre. Compared to the previous treaty, the new version had many changes: *Binh Thuan* was returned to Annam, the three provinces of *Thanh Hoa*, *Nghe An*, and *Ha Tinh* were merged into the territory of Annam, while the French ambassador and his entourage were allowed to reside in the inner city of *Hue*, a clear symbol of the protectorate [Bouinais, Paulus 1886, 73–75].

⁵ Proof of the above problem can be seen in the case of landowner Huynh Thien Loc, who owns 12,000 hectares of land in *Rach Gia*; this number is three times the total area of rice land in *Ha Tien* in 1930. At the same time, if we analyze the number of landowners from 2,001 to 4,000 hectares of land in the Southwestern Cochinchina, there are 15 landowners. In which *Rach Gia* and *Soc Trang* have three owners, *Bac Lieu* and *Can Tho* have one owner. Owning over 4,000 hectares, *Bac Lieu* has only three owners, while *Rach Gia* has one owner. Thus, the four largest landlords in Cochinchina are all in *Bac Lieu* and *Rach Gia* [Dương 1967, 142].

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Французський колоніалізм та питання приватизації землі у В'єтнамі: дослідження Південно-Західної Кохінхіні (1867–1940)

У цій статті розглядається процес приватизації землі в Південно-Західній Кохінхіні (В'єтнам) з 1867-го до 1940 року під час французького колоніального правління. Спираючись на колоніальні адміністративні звіти, кадастрові записи та відповідні наукові праці, зокрема архівні матеріали, що наразі зберігаються в Національному архівному центрі II в місті Хошиміні, це дослідження застосовує історичний, логічний та кількісний методи для аналізу того, як колоніальна держава встановила правову базу через реєстрацію землі, концесії та публічні аукціони. Така діяльність перетворила землю на товар, який підлягає відчуженню, та інтегрувала її в колоніальну ринкову економіку. Ця інституційна база не лише легітимізувала приватну власність, а й сприяла обігу, накопиченню та концентрації землі в безпрецедентних масштабах. Хоча ця політика разом із великими інвестиціями в гідравлічну інфраструктуру (особливо розширення мереж каналів) уможливила великомасштабне освоєння земель та швидке зростання посівних площ, перетворивши Південно-Західну

Кохінхіну на головний центр виробництва рису в Індокитаї, вона також спричинила глибокі структурні дисбаланси. Земля дедалі більше зосереджувалася в руках порівняно невеликої групи землевласників, включно не лише з французькими концесіонерами, а й із частиною заможної в'єтнамської еліти, деякі представники якої набули французького громадянства та брали активну участь у великомасштабному накопиченні земель.

Тим часом більшість сільських жителів залишалися дрібними власниками або безземельними селянами, стикаючись зі щораз більшою залежністю від оренди, кредитів та мінливих ринкових умов. Як наслідок, традиційні обшинні структури землеволодіння поступово руйнувалися, і виникло глибоко стратифіковане сільське суспільство, що характеризувалося нерівним доступом до землі та зростанням соціально-економічного розриву. Розглядаючи ці трансформації в межах ширшої логіки колоніальної експлуатації, стаття підкреслює подвійну природу французької політики, яка одночасно сприяла сільськогосподарському розширенню та комерціалізації, поглиблюючи соціальну нерівність і докорінно змінюючи аграрні відносини в Південно-Західній Кохінхіні.

Ключові слова: аграрні відносини; Індокитай; Південно-Західна Кохінхіна; приватизація землі; французький колоніалізм

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