INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, I became captivated by the topic that forms the core of this book: the rise of a Vietnamese public sphere and the role of print therein from 1920 to 1945. While scholars have routinely commented on how “literary” the Vietnamese have been, no one had studied the economic and social history of the Vietnamese use of print. This book began, then, as a project to fill that gap.

My project was also animated by a disquieting sense that the received political narrative of Vietnamese history, in which anticolonial nationalism and revolution ultimately defined the significance of most of the twentieth century, had slighted the cultural and intellectual history of Buddhism and Confucianism while overrating the significance of communism. A reevaluation was, I believed, in order.

Arriving at an understanding of Vietnam’s public and clandestine spheres and their print cultures was harder than I had at first imagined because of the nature of the sources at my disposal, especially archives and the pre-1945 publications themselves. I was disappointed to find that the archival sources had insufficient information on the economic and social history of publishing. These archives, product of a colonial state, overwhelmingly present a picture of the world of print in terms of its relation to politics and state power. After all, the colonial state was most interested in controlling and repressing perceived threats to its authority. This statist view of the public realm, reflected in the archives, might lead the researcher to conclude that the colonial state dominated the realm of print. It is an enormously seductive view.

Seductive? Yes, for historiographical and personal reasons. “Reading the archive,” the French historian Arlette Farge states, “immediately incites a sense of the real that no printed matter, however little known, can arouse.” If printed texts are meant to be read by a public, the same is not true of archival documents. The fact that the archive was not meant to be open to the public leads us to believe that we are unmasking secrets: “It is in this sense that it compels reading, ‘ensnares’ the reader, produces in him the feeling of finally seizing hold of the real. And not of examining [the real] through a story about, a discourse on.” It is perhaps no
What I found in the colonial archives was tantalizing. Reading the archives does incite a sense of finally encountering the real. Buried in the archives one can find records of embarrassing controversies in Vietnamese communist history that Party historians are loathe to mention. It is a relief to find them: they seem to affirm the worth of the search. Even the best Vietnamese historians of the modern period have been hostage to shifts in the party line, and we readers hunger for unbridled access to the “secrets” that the Party wishes to conceal.

The archives do not simply provide records of Vietnamese secrets about the past. They also contain evidence of how the colonial state censored publications and thus refashioned Vietnamese discourse in the present and memories of the past. The archives can be used, in other words, to undermine the French colonial state’s public transcript of its relationship with its subjects. But even with such evidence, one must always return to the question: who is writing these archives, and whose vision of reality predominates? Reading through the files of the French colonial state, I was frustrated by the partiality of the view presented. Thus, while I draw heavily on archives in Part 1, most of my book relies on other sources.

Ultimately, most of this book is based on publications printed before 1945. The ravages of war and the passage of time have conspired to destroy many copies of printed matter. Censorship and destruction of property by postcolonial states have also decimated the historical record. But many precious books and tracts remain. When I first began research into Vietnamese print culture, I was stunned by the sheer variety of material published between 1920 and 1945 that is available to the researcher—stunned because, with the exception of David Marr, no historian outside of Vietnam has extensively exploited the available collections of printed matter from this period. One of the great accomplishments of the French colonial state was to preserve collections, now available at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris and the National Library in Hanoi, of the great majority of works published in this time period.

Starting with the Paris collection, then continuing with its Vietnamese counterparts, I became aware of a realm that I had only imperfectly known. If to Farge the archive often seems more real than stories or
discourses about the past, in the case of Vietnam, this is not quite true. So many stories have not been told about this past and scholars have so rarely exploited the richness of printed texts from 1920 to 1945 that reading such (once public) material from this period can be a revelation. This book largely explores the world as viewed through such texts.

The choice of topics in this book merits a brief mention. In a very rough sense, different chapters attempt to follow the trajectory of printed matter itself: that is, from the creation and publishing of printed matter, through its control by the state, to its circulation and appropriation. To put it differently, I am not simply interested in the production of printed matter but attempt to explore how audiences made sense of such material. The first two chapters develop these points by providing an overview of the public sphere and state repression. They are followed by three topical chapters on the print cultures of Buddhism, Confucianism, and communism. The choice of these three topical chapters is not arbitrary. Although it is intrinsically interesting to explore how three beliefs with universalistic pretensions have been localized, this is not the main reason for choosing them. Two of these topics, Buddhism and Confucianism, had (with a few notable exceptions) been surprisingly neglected in works on the twentieth century. My first intent, then, was to see if this oversight was justified.

To confirm my sense that the topics of Buddhism and Confucianism retained a significance in this period, I methodically surveyed the Fonds indochinois in France's Bibliothèque nationale. While this collection cannot be said to represent what Vietnamese might have wanted to write (censors stopped many Vietnamese from publishing critiques of French political rule, for example), it is a reasonably complete collection of all publications from the 1920–1945 period. Based on my survey, I came to my first important conclusion: the writings of the avant-garde made up a small percentage of all writings. My second major realization, hardly surprising, was that tracts and books on religion and morals far outweighed those on politics. Rather than studying a topic because leading colonial or postcolonial historians deemed it important, in this book I have sought to examine what was actually important to the print culture of the 1920–1945 period. Based on the sheer numbers of books on morals and religion found in French and Vietnamese collections, it makes sense to explore the printed discourses of Buddhism and Confucianism.
Nonetheless, to exclude some topics because they are not represented in catalogs of legally published books and tracts would be a mistake: not all publications were legal. Consequently I have added a chapter on illegal communist tracts and newspapers. Communism only fitfully influenced public life between 1920 and 1945—in fact, I believe that its intellectual contribution in its early years has been overrated—but through it one can explore the ways that a public and legal realm was constituted against a persistent illegal discourse on the margins.

The three chapters in Part 2 complement the general comments about print culture and the public sphere with specific case studies. These chapters do not pretend to cover all of Vietnam: each one has a rough geographical focus. By not placing the subjects of these chapters in a national frame, this book resists the tendency of the nationalist historiography to subsume local and regional transformations to developments at the national level.

But I don’t want to jump ahead of the story. Let us begin by examining the rise of a public realm of discourse and then exploring the vexed attempts of colonial administrators to control the public. It is only with such a background that one can fully grasp the character of the public realm, the limits of state power, and the inventive chaos of Vietnamese in the 1920–1945 period.