

EXPLORING ASIA:

ASIAN CITIES — GROWTH AND CHANGE

THE RICKSHAW TRADE IN COLONIAL VIETNAM

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Editor's note: This article is the third of five featuring pieces by Dr. Anand Yang, Dr. Anu Taranth, Dr. Kam Wing Chan, and Nathaniel Trumbull.

The rickshaw, imported into Hanoi from Japan in the 1880s, was the most popular form of transportation in Hanoi and Saigon in the period between 1910 and 1935. As these cities developed and grew rapidly, and French Indochina became more integrated into the world economy, rickshaws served the increasing demand for an accessible and convenient mode of transportation. Automobiles were only used by the wealthy and bicycles (which eventually overtook rickshaws,) were used mainly by men.

The economy boomed during the 1920s, and numerous aspects of urban life modernized. Such changes required a matching acceleration in urban mobility. Between 1915 and 1925, the number of pullers in Hanoi increased tenfold from 1,200 to 12,000, reaching nearly 10 percent of the city's overall population. Issues of traffic control became much more important. There was a quest for lighter and faster rickshaws that enabled pullers to run faster, enhancing traffic flow. Each rickshaw was pulled by three to four men over a 24-hour period, so rickshaws were available day and night. Rickshaws were used not only within cities but also for long distance travel and tourism. Guidebooks advertised "very comfortable rickshaws for all directions" that were available for hire. It was not unusual for pullers to cover 27 miles per day. Rickshaws were an indispensable and integral part of daily life for much of the urban population and a portion of the rural population.

The circulation of rickshaws entailed issues of hygiene, traffic control, taxation, convenience,

comfort, aesthetics, uses of public space and morality. The rickshaw trade supplied significant portions of municipal budgets in the form of taxation. In the colonial period, public rickshaws were taxed at a much higher rate than automobiles or private rickshaws used by the colonizers. Municipalities issued ordinances to prevent young boys, the elderly or those with illness from pulling rickshaws—but in vain. Such ordinances were more often motivated by the need to ensure the fast movement of rickshaws and the concern for hygiene, rather than concern for the pullers. Rickshaw pulling was a very physically demanding type of work, and many could not withstand more than three years of such labor. Many pullers were addicted to opium, seen as both a crucial source of strength and also just about the only means of recreation. Rickshaw pulling was also a dangerous occupation because of the pullers' exposure to automobiles and trucks. Rickshaw pullers were regularly subject to cruel treatment by the French.

French manufacturers and businessmen were the major beneficiaries of the lucrative rickshaw business, and the Chinese operated smaller rickshaw rental firms. By the 1920s, some Vietnamese rickshaw rental firms grew in size, indicative of the growing Vietnamese role in the economy. Rickshaw firms employed intermediaries who recruited the pullers, called "coolies." Even as many rickshaws became more comfortable, safe, elegant and faster with padded seats, steel wheels with rubber rims, awnings and light fixtures, these "luxury" rickshaws continued to depend on the same basic human traction, and the work and living conditions of rickshaw pullers did not improve over the half a century when the occupation existed.

Rickshaws provoked much anxiety among Vietnamese journalists and intellectuals. As a



A rickshaw and driver in Hanoi

singularly paradoxical means of locomotion—often seen as demeaning or dehumanizing to the pullers, many of whom were weak, elderly or too young and yet pulled rickshaws weighing up to 200 pounds—the rickshaw came to be symbolic of broader social problems and stirred controversies that were debated in the press and channeled into political ideologies. The trade itself was controversial because it revealed stark divisions between rich manufacturers and the poor, and it led to the exploitation of some of the most downtrodden by rickshaw firms and middlemen alike. There were varied opinions among the public about the role of rickshaws in society.

The call to suppress rickshaws emerged early, and the view that the rickshaw was a backward mode of transportation that should sooner or later disappear became more widespread from the mid-1920s onward. Others preferred a reform of the system. Some of the Vietnamese middle class felt guilty about using rickshaws but did so out of necessity. By the 1930s, there was a collective recognition among a broad sector of the Vietnamese public that the rickshaw trade had a corrosive effect on society. The rickshaw trade gradually disappeared by the 1950s.



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