The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890–1980

Christina Elizabeth Firpo

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Christina Firpo's *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina* tackles an intriguing topic that has long fascinated historians of colonialism: the *métis* (mixed race) children born out of liaisons between European men and Indochinese women. This monograph is a much-welcome contribution to a body of rich and constantly growing literature on colonial youth and childhood that has drawn scholarly attention to the enduring consequences of global imperial encounters and their legacies for colonial societies in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Americas, and elsewhere. In the historiographical context of French Indochina, Firpo's work is fresh and pioneering: it is the first systematic and comprehensive study of fatherless *métis* children and their removals by the French colonial regime from the children's native cultural milieus in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. An ambitious and empirically rigorous research, it traces the dramatic shifts in colonial initiatives, institutional transformations, and attitudes from 1890 to 1980 as the French sought to educate *métis* children into Frenchmen and to subsequently tighten the grip of colonial rule by eliminating the threat of native resentment. Creating a database that tracks more than 4,000 *métis* protection society wards over multiple decades, Firpo effectively and brilliantly demonstrates the magnitude of colonial concerns over the question of racial purity and its importance to the upholding of the *mission civilisatrice*, and the centrality of these *métis* removals to nineteenth- and twentieth-century French imperial statecraft. More than just studying the colonial impetus to reproduce the French race, Firpo also attends to the situations of indigenous women and "explores the effects, both insidious and blatant, of colonialism on colonized societies and, in particular, on mothers and children" (p. 14).

The first two chapters set up the historical background informing the French decision to establish specialized agricultural schools that exclusively admitted *métis* children and provide the context for the shifting French attitude toward this population in the face of massive casualties during the Great War. Chapter 1 discusses a series of colonial projects implemented in reaction to two sets of prevalent anxieties among the French colonial bureaucracy. One was the fear of an increasing number of *métis* children whose fathers had abandoned them and whose denials of French citizenship would produce a future generation of rebellious anticolonial individuals threatening the stability of French colonial rule. And second was the colonial apprehension, often rooted in debates on race and Franco-indigenous liaisons in the metropole, about the contamination of a pure French race. Perceiving these issues as dangerous, the French, in the name of protecting an at-risk European class and preventing the colony from being infiltrated with *métis* rebels, founded *métis* protection societies across Indochina to remove Eurasian children from maternal care and

put them in French schools that taught the French language and agricultural training. But, as Firpo convincingly argues through the case of the Collège Agricole De Hưng Hoá, these educational initiatives often failed to achieve their intended goals. Plagued by financial issues and refusals from some colonial administrators to treat *métis* children as Frenchmen, the college fostered, in contrast, "colonial racist attitudes" (p. 34), bringing the children into violent conflict with the local Vietnamese population and thus creating a sense of self-entitlement that undermined French efforts to neutralize *métis* indignation against the regime. French attitudes toward *métis* children quickly shifted from abject rejection to embracement in the wake of wartime population decimation.

Chapter 2 delves into the colonial effort to regenerate the French race by incorporating *métis* children into French Republican citizenship. In this chapter, Firpo does an excellent job of illuminating the reinterpretation of metropolitan laws and the discursive strategies the French employed to justify protection societies' initiative to send fatherless *métis* children to the metropole and to establish Eurasian agricultural institutions in Annam. These programs, as the author points out, aimed to provide a road map for *métis* children to become fully French through practical training as they "learn to be productive citizens and contribute to metropolitan as well as colonial society" (p. 60).

The next two chapters highlight the impacts of socioeconomic ruptures at the height of the Great Depression and Indochinese Wars on the *métis* protection system. Chapter 3 explores what Firpo characterizes as the centralization of institutionalized social welfare and childcare that purported to alleviate the poverty wrecking Indochina during its period of economic depression. This period saw a boom not only in maternal trust to send *métis* children to orphanages cropping up all over the colony but also anxieties over what the French metropolitan government diagnosed as a lack of centralized governmental institutions to oversee the *métis* children's affairs. Due to lobbying efforts from the Les Français d'Indochine, a group of wealthy *métis* adults in Cochinchina, the metropolitan government established the Jules Brévié Foundation to direct a more centralized *métis* protection system and the École des Enfants de Troupe—a military school for *métis* children of French soldiers. While explicating the metropolitan dynamics central to the transformation of *métis* children policies, Firpo, by utilizing a diverse source base, also skillfully weaves in non-French perspectives such as those from the aforementioned *métis* groups and emerging Vietnamese discourses on sex, marriage, and consent that enlivened the colonial public sphere.

Chapter 4 continues against this backdrop and provides a little-known narrative of the colonial regime's desire to "repopulate" the French race in the overwhelming presence of the Japanese occupation of Vietnam in the 1940s. Once alienated as impure and detrimental to French civilization, the *métis* children now figured prominently in a new French racial taxonomy: they were to be the future of a robust French community in the colony that contributed to the makeup of a new class of French colonial elites. The colonial government attempted to achieve this by aggressively pushing for intensive searches of fatherless *métis* and settling them in strategic agricultural areas

in Tonkin and Dalat-Langbiang.

The final two chapters turn to the last years of French rule in Indochina. They both illuminate the strategic nature of *métis* children policies and the operations of the *métis* protection societies in relation to the preservation of colonial control. Chapter 5 analyzes the momentous formation of the Fédération des Oeuvres de l'Enfance Française Indochine (FOEFI) and its critical role in legitimizing French colonial rule at the height of Japan's deposing of the colonial government and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (DRV) declaration of independence in 1945. It articulates a complex web of power struggles among the DRV, the French government, and *métis* leaders as these historical actors competed over the symbolic functions of the *métis* population in their claims to political legitimacy. While the DRV had gradually embraced *métis* children and granted those who aligned with revolutionary causes Vietnamese citizenship, it used the children as potential wartime propaganda (p. 131). The French, struggling to maintain their rule in Indochina, cast *métis* children as the symbol of colonial paternalism, hence justifying their connections to the empire and the necessity to save these children through education and social welfare apparatuses. Meanwhile, the FOEFI and prominent *métis* leaders stressed the failure of French governance and demonstrated concern over the dire situation of Indochina and the fate of *métis* children in the colony. Together, they continued to support *métis* protection societies and intensified the effort to remove fatherless *métis* children.

Chapter 6 brings readers to a series of tensions and contestations between the FOEFI administrators, headed by William Bazé, and the postcolonial French government. After the 1954 Geneva Accords spelled an end to French Indochina, the FOEFI continued to hold onto the *métis* removal system as a means to sustain French imperial greatness even when the colonial government could no longer exert any jurisdictional power. It "pursued a multifaceted program to assimilate wards into French society" and "made every effort to cultivate in its charges a *métis* identity that was sufficiently French to pass as metropolitan" (p. 145). The French government, however, no longer held a favorable view of the FOEFI's activities. Over the course of 30 years, it attempted to stall applications for Eurasian and Afro-Asian re-immigration to France and to end the FOEFI's operations for good.

Firpo's comprehensive study is an admirable product of years-long rigorous research in multiple archives across France, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Its greatest strength, as also partially revealed in the chapter outline, lies in the author's mastery of both colonial and Vietnamese sources, which brings to the fore the complexity of colonial modernity rooted in French concerns over racial demography, social engineering, and the viability of imperial rule. Her monograph successfully captures the inherent contradictions and discursive nature of French civilizational discourses, providing an essential critique of colonial benevolence in its justification of the forceful, at times violent, removal of *métis* children from indigenous mothers. Firpo's effort to bring out social history perspectives from the victims and parties involved in this enterprise and to let the

subalterns speak from the heaps of colonial administrative archives is also commendable.

While an excellent monograph, *The Uprooted* leaves a few questions unanswered that future comparative studies could undertake: How was the on-the-ground experience of *métis* children in Laos and Cambodia different from that in Vietnam? How differently were public debates on sex, marriage, childcare, and social welfare configured in the distinctive Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese cultural milieus? And, lastly, how did the migratory experiences of *métis* youths and adults from colonies to the metropole inform the protection societies' policies?

Firpo's *The Uprooted* makes a critical scholarly contribution at the nexuses of race and colonial studies, French colonial history, history of family and childhood, youth studies, and Vietnamese studies. A compelling work of scholarship, it will serve as a methodological road map for subsequent studies on the topic and remain useful for a general readership with broad interest in the history of empire and colonialism.

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Early Modern Southeast Asia, 1350–1800

Ooi Keat Gin and Hoàng Anh Tuấn, eds.
Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016.

Early Modern Southeast Asia, 1350–1800 is an important book for any student, researcher, or educator of precolonial Southeast Asia. The contributors present the latest findings and establish new inroads into research about the region's pre-modern past. The book's agenda is stated clearly on the first page: to show "how well-developed Southeast Asia was before the onset of European involvement" and that it had a parity with "Europe in terms of socio-economic progress and attainments." The book is organized in four parts: Part 1, "Diplomatic and Inter-state Relations," reveals the complexities involved in trying to understand the development and nature of Southeast Asian state systems. Through case studies such as Ayutthaya, this section elucidates the importance of the agency and sophistication of Southeast Asian pre-modern states and political actors. This is not a new perspective, of course, but the nature of the information that attests to the reality of agency is new. This is why Bhawan Ruangsilp's analysis of the Phraklang Ministry of Ayutthaya is crucial. It shows evidence of a Southeast Asian pre-modern entity that attempted to "keep pace" with rapidly changing commercial and political environs with "bureaucratic innovations."

This part of the book would have benefited from a chapter on the newest archeological findings on the Angkor empire. This would have tied in well with Part 1's other contributors, as new evidence based on LIDAR scans has revealed a more extensive Angkor empire than previously