THE LAST EMPERORS OF VIETNAM: FROM TU DUC TO BAO DAI

Oscar Chapuis

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TO MY DAUGHTER SOLANGE VALERIE CHAPUIS

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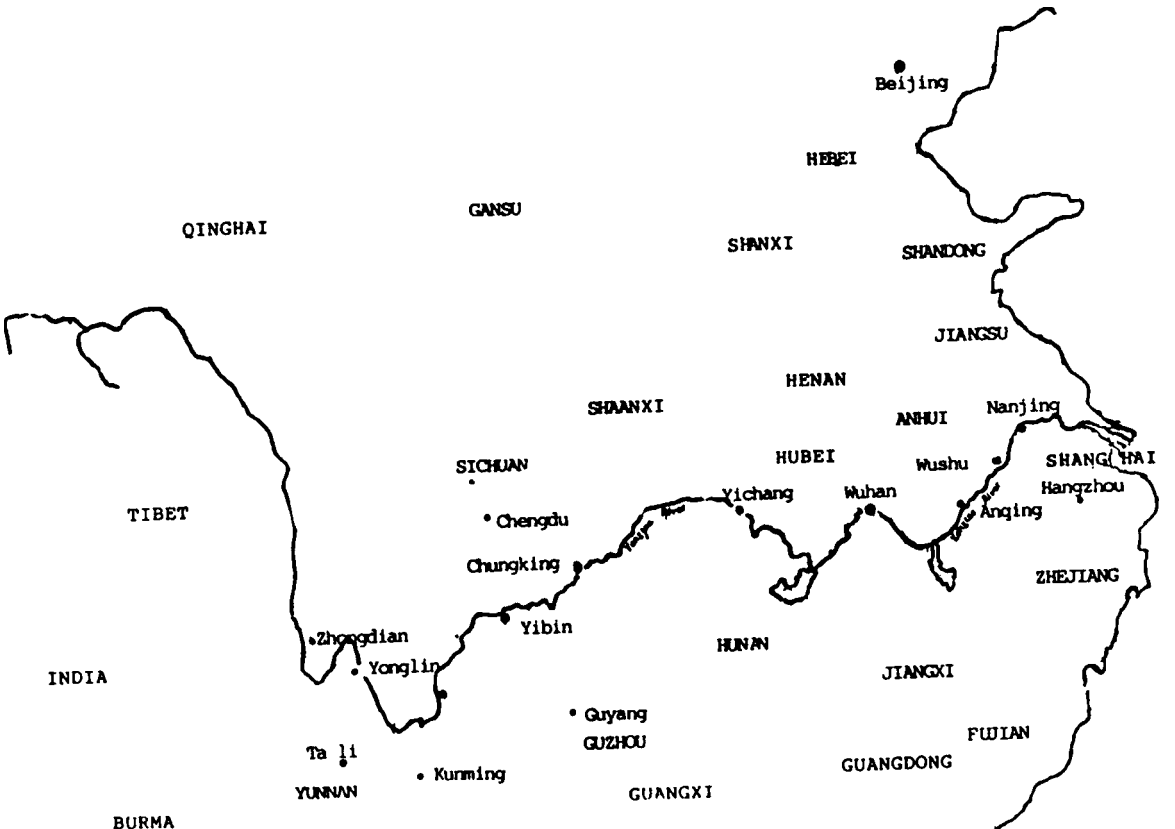
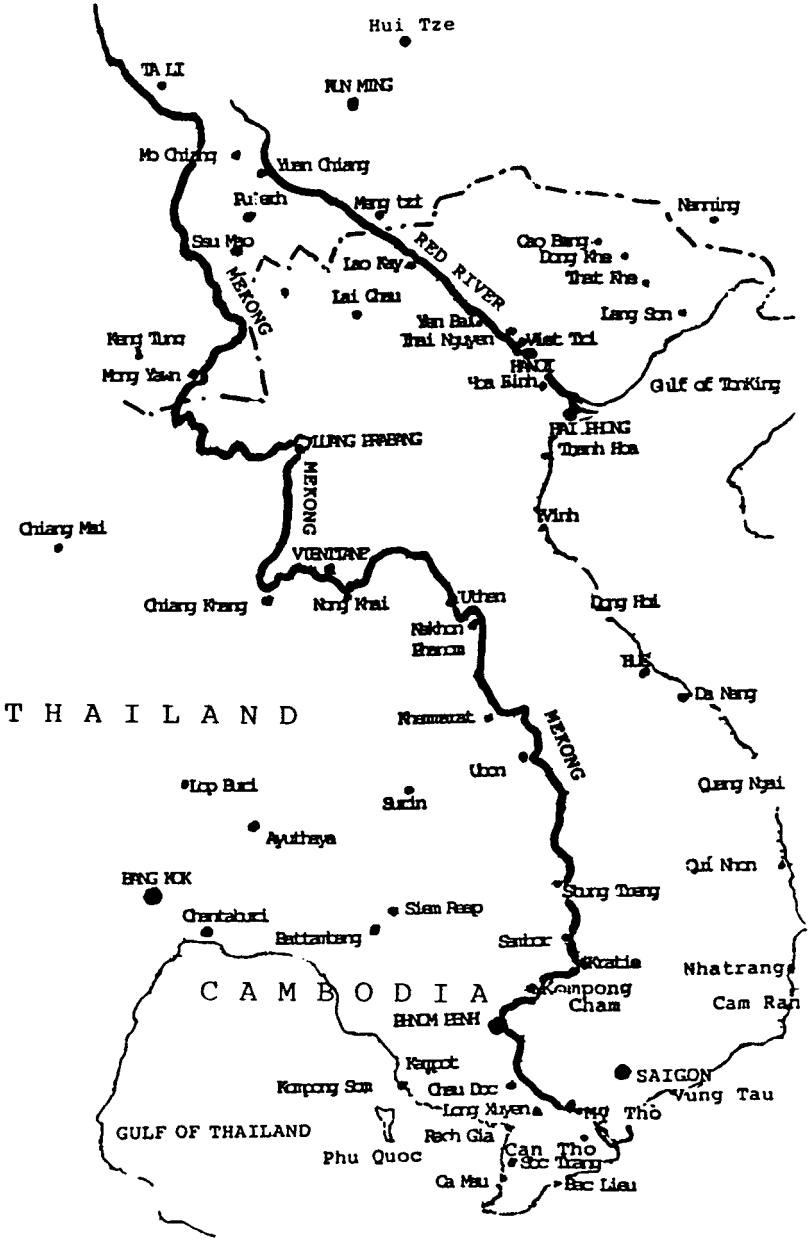
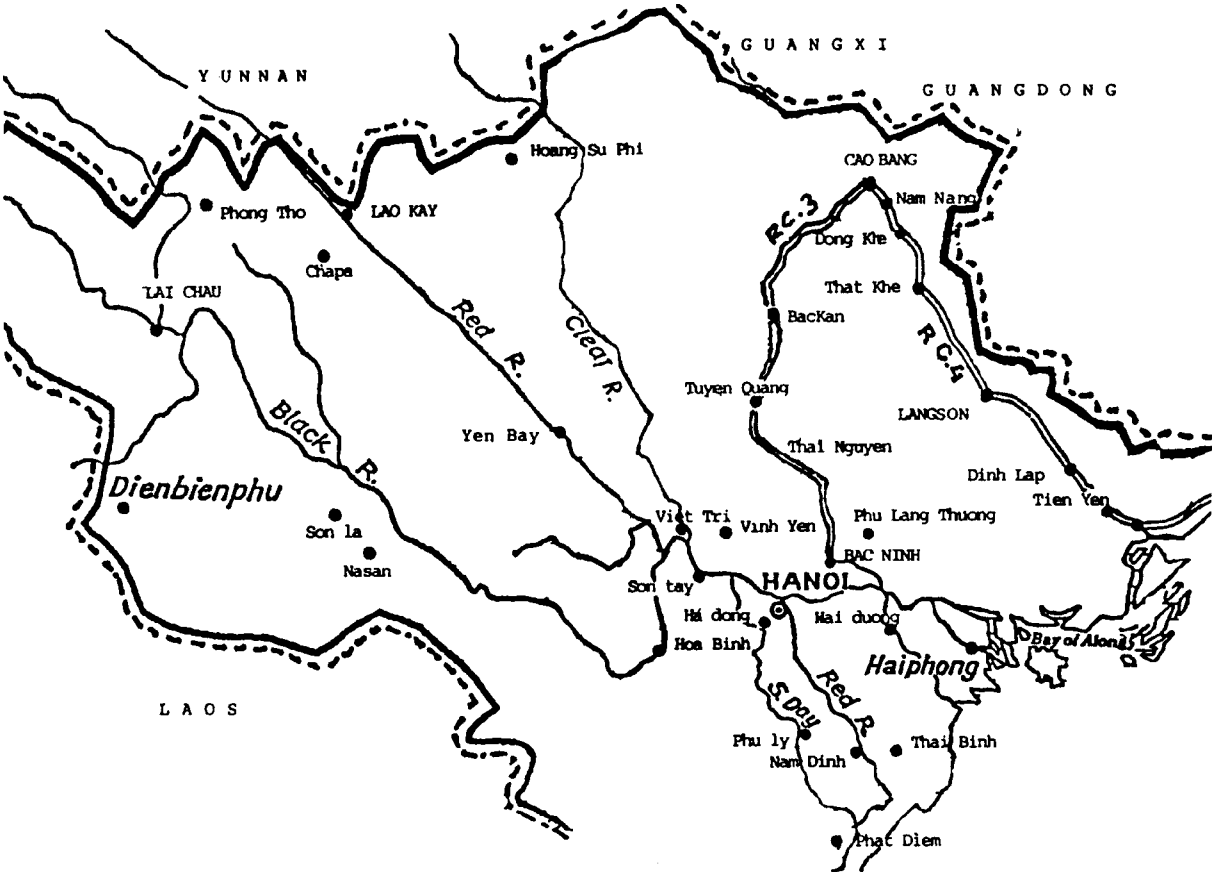
Map 1 The Yang Tze Kiang



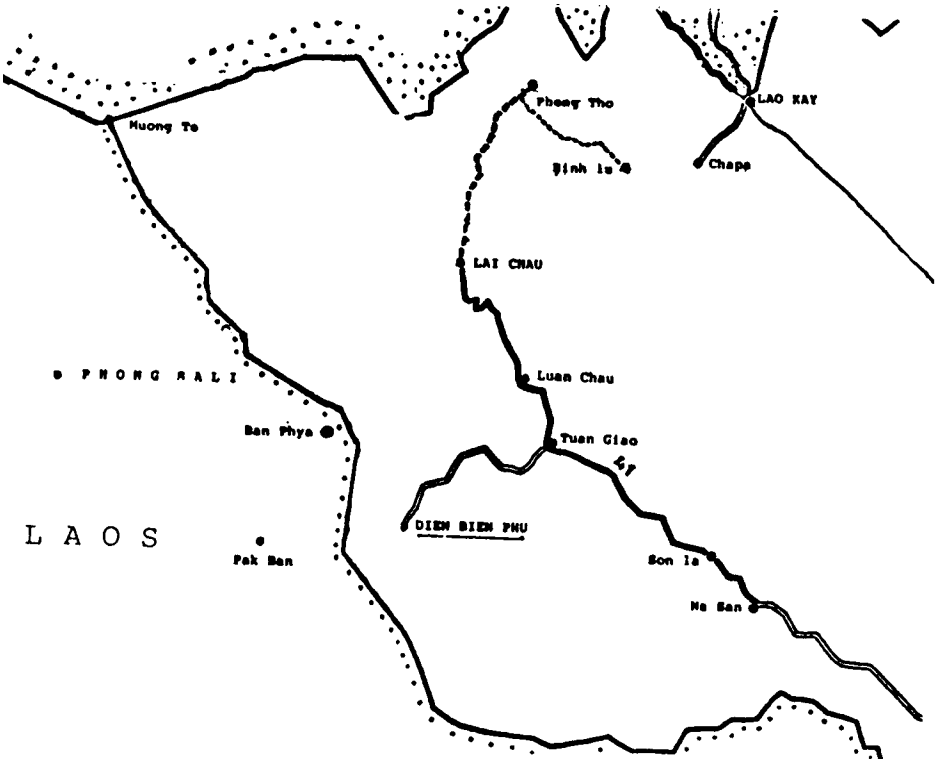
Map 2 The Mekong and the Red River



Map 3 RC4: Street without hope



Map 4 Dien Bien Phu



INTRODUCTION

CHINA, VIETNAM, FRANCE: AN OVERVIEW

In the 19th century, the Sons of Heaven began to phase out of a world they had ruled for some 5,000 years. The long disintegration process began with the warring states (403–221 B.C.) and continued with successive dynastic usurpations. In 1388, the White Lotus general Chu Yuan Chang became the founder of the Ming Dynasty, which later was brought down by the Manchu Nurhachi (1559–1626) who began the Ch'ing Dynasty. From then on, the Ch'ing had to continually fight against the White Lotus millennarians in the north and the secret society Triads in the south. After having crushed these internal revolts, the Ch'ing had to deal with western aggression. As for the White Lotus, they spread to adjacent countries where, under various religious denominations, they become involved in emancipation struggles.

In 1840, instead of paying their trade in silver currency, the British East India Company compelled China to accept opium bread from India. In response, the Special Commissioner Li Hung Chang destroyed the British opium stock, which he later refused to indemnify. When a Chinese was murdered by British sailors, Li Hung Chang ordered the withholding of all foreign shipments. The British reacted by sending 20 gun ships with 4,000 troops to destroy Chinese coastal cities and Guangzhou. Their armed vessels were the advanced guard of a commercial fleet loaded with opium. This was the "Opium War" which British prime minister Gladstone described as "a war more unjust in its origin . . . I do not know and have not read of."[1] Two years later in 1842, an exhausted China had to sign the Treaty of Nanking, which opened five ports, including Shanghai, to international trade. In addition, Hong Kong became a British colony.

As for the French, taking advantage of a temporary lull (1830–1860) and with British approval, they also went on to create havoc in China. By the time of the Treaty of Whampoa in 1844, they had several Chinese ports opened to French

trade and religion. That year, the United States obtained the same rights with the Treaty of Wanghsia.

In 1850, the impotence of the Chinese government and the influence of Protestant Christianity led to the outbreak of the Tai Pings, who seized half of the country and established the capital of Nanking. Their leader, a Christian mystic named Hong Xiu Quan, who claimed to be a brother of Jesus Christ, was supported by the West. But when his European allies sided with the imperial government and turned against him, he was defeated and committed suicide.

In 1856, hostilities resumed in Kwang Si after French missionary Chapdelaine was executed in Hsi Ling (Kwang Si) and a British ship was detained by the Chinese authorities. This was enough for France and Great Britain to dispatch several gunboats to seize Canton. This was known as the "gunboats diplomacy," which ended in 1858 by the treaty of Tien Tsin. China had to pay as war reparations 30 million pounds sterling to England and 15 million to France. Eleven Chinese ports were now opened to European trade.

The following year, 1859, Dowager Tzu Hsi, convinced that the Boxer rebels retained supernatural powers, allowed her troops to join the insurgents in a common assault against the foreign legations. In retaliation, 12,000 western soldiers stormed Peking and destroyed the Summer Palace. Tzu Hsi fled. She came back to sign the treaty of Peking on October 25, 1860. If it were not for the U.S. proposal of an Open Door policy, China could have become a western colony.

Treaties with China had ominous backlashes. Because westerners were allowed free trade, their first objective was to reach Yunnan, reputed to be the Chinese El Dorado. What was supposed to be the ideal road—the great Yang Tse Kiang River with its three splendid gorges—was nothing but a great disillusion. Thus, while the British went back to India to explore the Irrawady River, the French moved to Vietnam, determined to explore the Mekong. In the process, they secured control of Cochinchina (South Vietnam).

Actually, Vietnam policy was not explicitly formulated by the French government until Napoleon III. At the outset, the French presence was made possible by a quid pro quo among sailors, traders, and missionaries. The last-named provided political economic information on the Far East in exchange for transportation facilities on board merchant ships. The first missionaries even had to disguise themselves as traders, hence creating quite a confusion about their real activities.

In France, to win support for a conquest of Annam, they spread tales of a fabulous country where "gold was found everywhere even in ducks' feces." The French East India Company, created by Louis XIV's finance minister Colbert in 1664, took some initiative to establish in Asia. From 1732 to 1741, Thomas de St. Phalle relentlessly advocated the conquest of Vietnam. But before him, since 1720, Pierre Poivre had already been exploring Nam Ha (Cochinchina) as a missionary, and later he became a silk trader in China. In 1740, Dupleix, governor of the French East India Company, succeeded in ousting the British

from Madras and Pondicherry. But six years later, the French were expelled from Madras and set about looking for more bases in the Far East.

In 1748, Pierre Poivre became an expert on Cochinchina politics. Having secured a position within the French East India Company, he succeeded in obtaining the direction of a trade mission for the account of the company. He had problems with a powerful ruler, Lord Nguyen Phuoc Khoat (Vu Vuong), who not only did not pay for his purchases, but was even less easy to deal with when Poivre, without his permission, left Vietnam with an attractive male interpreter, Michel Cuong, perhaps as collateral for imperial debt. This incident, which in our present culture is simply a fact of life, assumed unexpected proportions: Missionaries were banned from Nam Ha until Bishop Bennetat, under order from Dupleix, was able to locate Poivre with Cuong in the middle of Mauritius Island. Thus, relations resumed between France and Annam but not the way the French expected.

In 1758, Admiral d'Estaing sired the idea of dispatching an expedition just for the purpose of looting royal treasures in Phu Xuan (Hue). Perhaps, at that time, it was the way French businessmen recovered their losses. Anyway, his expedition ended in disaster.[2]

Ten years later, in 1768, de Choiseul, war minister under Louis XV, envisaged with the French East India Company an expedition against Nam Ha, but in 1770 he fell into disgrace and the French East India Company, after the recall of Dupleix, collapsed for lack of government support.

In Nam Ha,[3] rivalry developed among Jesuit, Lazarist, and Dominican missionaries, which resulted in the elimination of the Jesuit team in 1774. Whether a secret expedition ordered by French foreign minister Vergennes had any relation to this Jesuit problem was not clear. Yet, in 1787, an event of primordial importance occurred, which was to have a definite impact on Franco-Annamite[4] relations. In November 1787, the Treaty of Versailles was signed with Lord Nguyen Anh, the future Emperor Gia Long, by which King Louis XVI would provide Nguyen Anh with a contingent of troops in exchange for ownership of Poulo Condore Island and the port of Danang, and unrestricted rights to establish trade factories all over Nam Ha. Negotiated by Bishop Pigneau de Behaine for the account of Nguyen Anh, the treaty was conspicuously silent on missionaries' rights. It was probably a mistake in Pigneau's calculations, since he took for granted that later Nguyen would pay him back with money and religious privileges.

France never implemented the 1787 treaty. Although the 1789 Great Revolution was given as an excuse, history reveals that the Governor Count de Conway of Pondicherry had received discretionary power to implement the agreement. Because he chose not to cooperate with Pigneau, the bishop had to build up the expedition at his own expense. Nguyen Anh became Emperor Gia Long. In spite of his debt toward Pigneau, he had to protect his country's interests. Thus, at the first sign of French interference, he secretly instructed his successors to keep them at arms' length.

After the death of Gia Long, his son Minh Mang, who as a good Confucian did not like Catholic missionaries particularly after Le Van Khoi's revolt, began to show systematic hostility toward France. First he courteously rejected a friendship treaty offered by Jean Baptiste Chaigneau, who was acting then as the French consul in Hue. Later, he again refused audience to Captains Courson and de Bougainville when they came to Danang. In 1824, utterly disenchanted, Chaigneau definitively left Vietnam with Vannier. In 1826, France made the last effort for diplomatic resumption by appointing Eugene Chaigneau to succeed his uncle Jean Baptiste, a French consul. He was never able to obtain one audience with Minh Mang. After he left, France made no further attempts.

It was the beginning of a period of isolation in which the new emperor, following the 1637 Japanese example, closed his country to missionaries and official trade. By the end of his reign, the opium war was a dominant concern to Minh Mang. Professor Paul Mus reported that what happened in China "gave Minh Mang a new perspective on the dark dangers which came from the West."[5] The presence of the Spanish in the Philippines, the Dutch in Indonesia, and a French consulate in Manila, let alone the French Far East fleet cruising endlessly in the South China Sea, were his motivation for sending a friendship mission to France and other European nations. The resulting fiasco evidenced their alienation after the barbaric execution of Father Marchand. His death in 1841 prevented him from concluding an accord with America.[6]

Yet, as their purpose was to obtain a consensus in order to force Paris to intervene in Vietnam, the French missionaries succeeded in enlisting the navy commanders who were anxious to emulate the British by having their own colonial empire. Considering that communication with Paris, at that initial stage of submarine cables, was still problematic, it was a good pretext for French commanders to place Paris in face of the "fait accompli."

It is also doubtful that at the outset, the French government had any definite vision about Vietnam, for costly wars in Europe and interminable problems at home deprived Paris of any overseas ambition. Under pro-British king Louis Philippe, anticlerical prime minister Guizot, to avoid jeopardizing entente with Britain, would do nothing to help the missionaries, for he badly needed external peace to devote time to domestic problems. Hence, the protection of missionaries was not in his political agenda. According to him, they had to take responsibility for their own doing. But in the remote Far East, the collusion between the navy and the church was beyond his control.

In 1840, Captain Favin Leveque arrived in Danang to demand the liberation of five missionaries, including priest Miche, who would later play an important part in the orientation of Franco-Vietnamese relations. Not only did the new emperor Thieu Tri readily comply, but he was friendly enough to the French to expect a rapprochement. In fact, Thieu Tri revealed himself to be a ruler wise enough to avoid any open conflict with France. Thus, he refrained from ordering imprisonment or deportation of missionaries, although a death sentence might

be pronounced to stay within traditions. When in 1845 the turbulent Bishop Lefebvre was sentenced to death, Admiral Cecille was dispatched by Guizot to obtain his release. Two years later, in 1847, Lefebvre was again captured when he returned to Vietnam. This time Cecille sent Captain Lapierre to Danang. Whether Lapierre was aware or not that Lefebvre had already been freed and on his way back to Singapore, the French first dismantled masts of some Vietnamese ships. Later, on April 14, 1847, in only one hour, the French sank the last five bronze-plated vessels in the bay of Danang. According to some accounts, this incident occurred after Vu Van Diem, a Catholic convert, had passed on military secrets to the French.

Finally, public pressure, manipulated by the Catholic church, forced Guizot to adopt an ambiguous line of conduct. Under the cover of assistance to the British in China, in 1843 he dispatched a fleet under the command of Admiral Cecille and Captain Charner, together with a diplomatic mission headed by Lagrene, who was to negotiate trading privileges with China. Because all of them were repeatedly instructed to keep away from the Vietnam coast for fear of British reaction, Lagrene went on to acquire the island of Basilan near the Philippines in order to build a base similar to Hong Kong. Unfortunately Spain strongly objected, claiming that Basilan was part of the Philippines. Thus, Guizot had to withdraw.

Later Cecille, at the instigation of his missionary friends, came back to Guizot with an even more daring project: France would restore the Le Dynasty in Tonkin and would obtain the possession of Danang as a reward. At this point, in the Pacific Ocean, Admiral Dupetit-Thouars, also with the advice of two missionaries, seized the island of Tahiti and proclaimed it a French protectorate. The British reaction was serious enough to compel Guizot to offer an appreciable indemnity. Afterward, a frustrated Guizot decided to shelve the question of Vietnam for an indefinite time.

In France, the fast-growing heavy industry—Le Creusot, Decazeville, Thionville—provoked the emergence of a worker class with social and political demands. Indeed, for 13 hours of daily work, men were paid 2 francs; women, 20 cents; and children, 10 cents.[7] Unanimously supported by republican intellectuals, progressive merchants, and liberal Catholics, the workers' movement organized banquets and demonstrations demanding reforms. They wanted, of course, higher wages. They also wanted voting rights, for out of a population of 30 million only 168,000 were able to vote, provided they paid a 200-franc special tax every year. In 1847, the famine came to exacerbate the general situation. The workers took to the streets joined by bourgeois intellectuals and the Catholics, who were against government monopoly over university education. Popular demonstrations turned to bloody confrontations when Guizot sent in the army under famous General Bugeaud. When he was finally dismissed by Louis Philippe, it was too late. The king himself had to go. His abdication to his grandson, the Count of Paris, was rejected: The people wanted no more of

the Orleans or Bourbon dynasties; they wanted the republic. A provisory committee was formed with workers and intellectuals including Lamartine, Arago, and Louis Blanc.

In spite of popular inclination for a republic, Republicans were not ready. They preferred to stay in the opposition, which is a traditional politician's tactic. Furthermore, the Napoleon I myth was well alive. Hence, the people turned toward his nephew who had on his record two failed coups d'états. On December 10, 1848, Louis Napoleon was elected president. Obviously, it was not a good choice for, as one can expect, by atavistic instinct, he was obsessed with reestablishing the imperial regime. Indeed, three years later, on December 2, 1851, for the third time, he reenacted Napoleon I's coup d'état of 18 Brumaire (the second month of the Republican calendar, October 23–November 21). Then, capitalizing on popular illusion, on December 21, he made himself emperor by plebiscite. Now he could devote his time to restoring the two essential features of the imperial system: "internal authority and external prestige."[8]

For external prestige, Louis Napoleon was anxious to wipe out the shame imposed on his uncle by the Treaty of 1815. But Louis Napoleon was no military genius. The series of wars he prosecuted in Europe, except for a few minor victories, turned out to be disasters, as were some of his colonial enterprises. On June 19, 1867, Maximilian, his candidate to the imperial throne of Mexico, was executed by the Mexican revolutionaries.

At home, the opposition of the Republicans became a constant threat to the imperial regime. Indeed, Gambetta declared that "all regimes were honored with an anniversary except those of the 18 Brumaire and the December 2." Even inside the imperial cabinet, opposition developed. Since no official policy existed for Vietnam, on April 22, 1857, Napoleon III created the Committee of Cochinchina. The apparent reason was to find a market for French-built locomotives and ships, but it was more to restore French prestige after continuous failures. His ministers disagreed. Minister of foreign affairs Walewski conveyed to the emperor his colleagues' reluctance to bellicose action in Cochinchina. Finance minister Fould bluntly said he did not know where Cochinchina was and, anyway, he would not allocate 6 million francs for a military expedition. Another minister, Billaut, advised "not to trust priests and sailors," referring to the missionaries and admirals, and yet another accused the Jesuits of fabricating a deplorable situation in Annam. Finally, given a negative consensus, it was decided to leave imperial orders about Cochinchina to the discretion of the navy commanders on the field.

In China, Admiral Rigault de Genouilly received on November 25, 1857, the first instruction to move his fleet to Danang. One month later, December 20, 1867, the Anglo-French occupation of Canton released de Genouilly from the China field. On August 31, 1958, he took Danang with a contingent of 3,000 Franco-Spanish troops. Professor Cao Huy Thuan quoted Bishop Retord as declaring that the conquest of Danang was crucial, for it was located near Hue the capital and would consequently bring unbearable pressure on the Annamite gov-