

SELECTED POEMS AND POPULAR SONGS REGARDING THE “MODERN” HAIRCUT

Introduction

By the early twentieth century, the French controlled the entire country of Vietnam, though they divided it into three *pays*, Tonkin (North), Annam (Center), and Cochinchina (South), joining them with Cambodia and Laos to form French Indochina. The Vietnamese faced not only French colonial dominance, but also the question of how they were to fit into the modern world.

One approach (in the north) was all in favor of striving for modernity as a way of resisting the French. Japan, the rising power of Asia, served as a strong model, especially after its great victory over the modern Imperial Russian fleet in 1905. Starting a “free school” in Hanoi, modeled on one in Tokyo (Dongkinh/Tonkin in Vietnamese) and adopting the Romanized alphabet for their language over Chinese characters, they moved actively about 1908 to begin their search for a Vietnamese modernity. Cutting the hair in the modern style (and rejecting the old male fashion of wearing the hair in a bun) became a strong visual theme. The reformist and nationalist Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926), a former scholar of the old school, strongly advocated it, and songs and poems followed calling for it.

Document Selections with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Aspects of Vietnamese History*, edited by Walter F. Vella (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1973), 65-66.

Selected Poems and Popular Songs Regarding the “Modern” Haircut

“Phen Nay Cat Toc Di Tu” (A Haircut to Become Monks [in] This Time)

By Nguyen Quyen (A school principal)

This time, [let’s] cut our hair to become monks
And in our pagoda of Modernization recite the prayers
For Independence.

Progressive scholars-turned-barbers

I beg of you, let me dispose of this bun of backwardness for you.

My left hand holding the comb,
My right hand holding the scissors,
Come on! Come on!

Smoothly we go!
Cut yourself off ignorance,
Cut yourself off backwardness...

Questions:

1. Why should cutting hair have been so novel an action?
2. How were religion and politics related here?
3. Who got their hair cut?

Longer Selection with Questions

From *Understanding Vietnam*, by Neil L. Jamieson (University of California Press, 1993), 59-61.

Selected Poems and Popular Songs Regarding the "Modern" Haircut

[Phan Chu Trinh gave a speech at the Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc school in Hanoi which ended with these words:]

Several thousand years ago our people cut off their hair and tattooed themselves. Only when Chao T'ò took over our country did we become infected with Chinese customs, but even then only a few people in urban centers followed them. It was not until the Ming invaders came in and ... compelled us to imitate them that our men began to let their hair grow and wore it in a bun, that our women began wearing trousers, and we became Chinese. But today ... fortunately, Heaven has opened our minds. We have awakened, and the entire nation is modernizing. So go out and cut your hair! Don't leave any more land for that stupid gang of parasites to colonize on top of your heads, from which they can suck your blood! Wouldn't it feel wonderful to be rid of them? Don't you think so? Don't you?

[Within a few weeks an anonymous "Haircutting Chant" was spreading from the streets of Hanoi to the rest of the land:]

Comb in the left hand,
Scissors in the right.
Clip away! Clip away!
Easy, easy, do it right.
Off with stupidity!
Off with foolishness!

**Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on
SELECTED POEMS AND POPULAR SONGS REGARDING THE “MODERN” HAIRCUTS**

Today we snip,
Tomorrow we shave!

[Nguyen Dinh Chieu, a blind poet of the resistance, summed up the prevailing Neo-Confucian position:]

I would rather face eternal darkness
Than see the face of traitors.

...

Being blind but knowing how to uphold family virtues
Is better than having eyes but neglecting one's ancestors

.....

Being blind and keeping one's body and mind intact
Is better than having eyes but having to cut hair and trim the beard.

[Another popular poem:]

Now is the time to shave our heads and become monks,
To chant the prayer of Independence in the temple of Modernity.
To pray, to supplicate tirelessly, day and night,
For the benefit of the nation, for the benefit of the people.
Become monks to open the minds of the people,
Become monks to help make our country rich and strong.

Questions:

1. Why would such outward appearance have meant so much?
2. How did the old and the new differ in this situation?
3. In what way did cutting hair reflect the situation in which the Vietnamese found themselves in the world?