



# **MUSEUM-MAKING IN VIETNAM, LAOS, AND CAMBODIA**

**CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND POLICIES FROM  
COLONIAL TO POST-COLONIAL TIMES**

Jonathan Paquette



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# Museum-Making in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia

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Building on archival work undertaken in France and fieldwork undertaken in Southeast Asia, *Museum-Making in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia* provides a critical analysis of museum histories and development in three former colonial territories.

This work documents the development of museums in French Indochina (1862–1954), specifically Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The book explores the colonial culture of exhibition, traces the growth of museum collections through archaeological missions to Indochina and other parts of Asia, and examines the role of museums in the cultural life of this colonial society. In particular, the author re-contextualizes the role and part played by colonial museums in the implementation of heritage policies during the colonial era in French Indochina, a dimension that is often overlooked. Additionally, the book addresses the effects that the Second World War, the Vichy Regime, and the Japanese occupation had on these cultural institutions. The transformation of these museums in post-independence Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia is also discussed.

Providing comparisons with other colonial and post-colonial experiences, *Museum-Making in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia* will be a valuable resource for researchers in museum and heritage studies. It will also appeal to researchers and graduate students engaged in the study of history, anthropology, sociology, political science, and development and international studies.

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# Introduction

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In 1951, a young French curator prepared a technical report to reorganize and modernize the administration of museums in French Indochina. Bernard-Philippe Groslier, the young curator in question, was Cambodian-born, and the son of Angkor-raised George Groslier, one of the most important figures of heritage conservation. After years of study in Paris, and after joining the resistance, the curator was ready to return to the land where he had lived most of his life and where his father had died under the Japanese occupation in 1945. The 1950s were uncertain times for France in Indochina. Nonetheless, the authorities were determined to maintain their operations and support their institutions. The 1951 technical report prepared by Bernard-Philippe Groslier concludes on the following note:

The legal apparatus, if homogenous, will facilitate the life of the museum. Scientific thoughts will always remain its soul. Financial means will be the necessary condition for its operation. But, what we have not said, and remains capital, is that the museum is one of the highest and one of the most moving manifestations of culture. The potential for spiritual enrichment that it represents is beyond any possible estimation, the most precious institution that a nation has at its disposal.

(EFEO, 1951)<sup>1</sup>

While conveying the complexity of the museum, this statement also embodies the series of transformations that were occurring in the museums and collections developed by French colonial authorities in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In the 1950s, these museums were in the course of being modernized – that is, they were entering, like many museums around the world, decades of a process of intellectualizing museum practices and rationalizing museum administration. This process was the result of the rise of multilateral institutions in the years immediately following the Second World War. Beyond its purely administrative aspect, this conclusion to a technical note for museum management also brings to light important beliefs about the nature of the institution, insisting on its cultural and spiritual values. Museums also serve nations, and the conclusion of Bernard-Philippe Groslier's technical

note is prescient of the new role that the museums of the region would come to play a couple of years later.

In 1951, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia had been administered by a foreign power for more than five decades. In some parts of the region, French rule lasted almost a hundred years and could be traced back to the early 1860s. In the 1950s, the region was recovering from years of Japanese occupation and years of administration under the Vichy Regime; it had its own experience of the Second World War. The end of the Second World War also gave momentum to nationalist and socialist movements of the region. Nations under foreign domination that had been politically organizing for decades were finally seeing part of their plans come into fruition. In 1954, French Indochina and France's colonial presence ended over a couple of critical months, between the French military defeat of Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference. While the mid-1950s mark the end of this foreign occupation, the region would endure decades of duress and hardship marked by further foreign invasions, military occupations, and civil wars.

Museums are institutions. They are shaped by individuals (or groups of individuals) – scholars, scientists, and art connoisseurs – who imagine them, who give them their orientations and structures. They are also shaped by broader social and political forces. This book is about museum-making; it is concerned with the practices, ideas, and resources put together to give form to museum institutions. The construction or development of a museum institution may be the fruit of the efforts of a single dedicated individual, an 'institutional entrepreneur', but more often institutions – including museums – tend to be the result of a more distributed action across a vast array of actors. These practices are not only seminal to museum institutions, but they give them their specific organizational identities, their fabric and singularity. This book delves into museum-making in colonial French Indochina; it looks deeply into the practices, but it also tries to make sense of the context. Museum-making is a contextual activity; it is the result of individuals' and groups' capacity to make sense of and mobilize the resources of their environment, and their capacity to respond to this environment. This book attempts to provide answers to the following questions: What are the main patterns of museum development during the colonial era in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia? What are the main institutional factors that enabled or constrained these institutions and the actors behind these different museum projects? What were the main ideational components, the values and norms, at play in shaping these institutions? How did these institutions transform over time, all the way to post-colonial times? This book provides a series of answers to these questions based on historical documents, archives, press material, and a series of other sources. More importantly, this book brings to light the struggles, constraints, and challenges that actors involved in museum-making had to deal with, and thus challenge a perhaps linear view of these institutions' development in colonial times.

This introduction presents the historical and theoretical anchorage of this book. The first sub-section aims to engage with the literature on colonialism

in Museum and Heritage Studies. The objective is to synthesize the main ideas in the literature and situate this book in relation to decades of scholarship on colonialism in Museum and Heritage Studies. The second sub-section further elaborates on the concept of museum-making that is central to this book and provides some insights about its value for comparative analysis, in particular for making sense of museum-making during the colonial era in Asia. Finally, the third section discusses the existing literature on heritage and museums in French Indochina, and presents the book's singular contributions, as well as offers a general outline of the book and its main arguments.

### 1.1 Museums, heritage, and colonialism

The museum is a fascinating institution. In his global historiography of museums, Krzysztof Pomian (2020) even suggested that the museum is a 'strange institution' and that its strangeness or uncanniness is owing to its paradoxical nature as an institution that is simultaneously unnecessary and indispensable (p. 9). It is true that the museum is an institution whose necessity varies from one society to another. In some societies, there is very little support for museums; in other societies, museums are seen primarily as private institutions, while in others still, they are public institutions and sustained by strong public policies. The place that a museum occupies in a given society depends largely on the nature and range of functions that it undertakes (Higgins, 2008; Gray, 2015; Gray & McCall, 2020; Hadley & Gray, 2017). Some of these functions are intrinsic; they are linked to the core activities that museums provide, which include collecting, preserving, researching, and communicating heritage. Others are further reaching social and political objectives. It is generally assumed that museums have come to be indispensable in some societies because of the nature and range of services they provide (Davies, 2008; Kann-Rasmussen, 2019). Museums are stronger, and arguably more indispensable, when they are capable of linking their core activities to a broader societal or political objective. Museums are seen as tools for social and economic development (Nelson, 2020), as educational institutions (Zipsane, 2011), as instruments for greater social cohesion and inclusion (Gunter, 2019; McMillen & Alter, 2017; Sandell, 2003), as tools for cultural diplomacy (Cho, 2021; Mairesse, 2019; Nisbett, 2013), and as former (or current) instruments of the colonial order (de l'Estoile, 2010; Doustaly, 2017; Grognet, 2007). This idea is generally where any reflection on museums and heritage in colonial times begins. In many societies, and for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, museums and heritage have been commonly discussed as instruments of colonial power.

Colonialism and colonial history are major themes in museum and heritage studies. There is copious literature devoted to these topics, with researchers documenting the significant role of museums in colonial history. While there is significant overlap in the literature on colonialism in Museum and Heritage

Studies, there are also a number of important nuances that should be kept in mind when approaching the issue. The main differences tend to be theoretical and epistemological. In this sub-section, we will go over some of the main and most important themes of this literature in order to better situate the premise from which this book is operating.

One of the most important streams of the literature dedicated to the relationship between museums and colonialism focuses on the museum in European metropolises. Multiple case studies show how Western museums have reflected certain racial ideologies, promoting the so-called civilizing effect of European colonizers on 'primitive' populations (Bennett, 2004; Bennett et al., 2014; Coombes, 1994; Lynch & Alberti, 2010; Rahier, 2003). Whether through harmful perversions of evolutionary theory and ideas on ethnicity, or through the advancement of a cultural imaginary that underscores the exoticism of foreign cultures, museum spaces have been, and in some cases arguably remain, an accomplice of colonial ideology, both explicitly and implicitly. This literature emphasizes the co-construction of the museum institution and the museum experience of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the development of colonial empires. This rich literature typically revolves around the accompanying rise of colonialism and museum culture in Paris, Brussels, Lisbon, London, Berlin, and many other European cities. It also extends to the development of museum cultures in Canada, in the United States, in Australia, and in New Zealand, where museums are studied as part of the number of political, social, and cultural institutions that were developed through these singular experiences of colonialism characterized by the production of new colonies, new settlements, made possible by the mass migration of not only European but also African and Asian populations. What we learn from the development of museums in the Americas and the Pacific is that most of the national institutions followed collection and exhibition practices that meshed with the practices in colonial metropolises. Decades after entering the twentieth century, many of these institutions of the 'New World' developed museum exhibits, often uncritically, starting their new national histories from the memory of their former homeland.

Whether it is to document cases in Europe, the Americas, or the Pacific, this literature, very likely the most important in the field, shares three important commonalities. First, museums are seen as a prominent agent responsible for the construction and circulation of colonial ideology. There is a strong Foucauldian thesis (see Bennett, 2004, 2009) that underlies this literature and which makes of the museum a space where a discursive practice is performed (Foucault, 1969); the museum space provides a 'truth effect' to colonial discourse. This is a dominant theoretical perspective for studying the relationship between museums and colonialism.

Strangely, these critiques of colonialism lose their systematicity and some of their relevance when applied to museums in the colonies in post-colonial times. As much as Benedict Anderson (2006) would like to see a connection among Asian museums after independence, the reality is that most of the strength of

the analysis loses its power when confronted empirically. Paying a visit to a national museum in Beijing, Hanoi, Singapore, or Kuala Lumpur should suffice to convince one that the visitor is not placed in front of a regime of exhibitions and a discursive practice that aims to create the truth about power but rather that the visitor is exposed to a national narrative (not discourse) that presents the history of the nation following different times and spaces. Museums of the Global South, most museums of Asia, are spaces where the depth of a Foucauldian analysis may fall short. In Asia, museum exhibits inscribe an officially sanctioned narrative of collective or national identity. Moreover, in Museum Studies, socialism in museums is rarely seen as a potential post-colonial narrative of liberation and generally only defined as an authoritative narrative; this brings to salience many misunderstandings about Asia.

To find a continuation or an echo of this theoretical perspective, one may have to focus on museums in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, where post-colonial theory is applied to case studies and is increasingly noticeable in the literature. Following some principles of Foucauldian archaeology, post-colonial theory is a label that imperfectly reunites a number of authors who place issues of identity at the forefront of their analysis. Post-colonial theory is a label in the same way as postmodernism is. As it is at times difficult to suggest that Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida are all postmodern authors or that they all share the same views, it is also challenging to reassemble post-colonial thinkers such as Edward Said, Édouard Glissant, Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, or Aimé Césaire under the same umbrella or label. Nonetheless, as imperfect as this label may be, such a theoretical perspective in the humanities and social sciences has come to signify and reunite scholars interested in the contemporary museum as a space of oppression. The museum would be a space of epistemic violence (Vawda, 2019); it would exploit underprivileged populations, exclude them and extract from them some vital forces, or critique them for being overly Eurocentric in their exhibits and practices (Chambers et al., 2014; Forni et al., 2019). Western museums are often taken as spaces where imbalances created in the nineteenth century are ritually recycled, and therefore museums are spaces that would require decolonization (Minott, 2019; Ünsal, 2019). This stream of literature often extends into social movement discourses and when it does not call for outright decolonization, it calls for more sensibility in museum institutions (Jennings et al., 2019).

These two corresponding bodies of literature share many theoretical references and epistemological principles in common. They emphasize the ideological dimension of colonialism in colonial history. Post-colonial theory is, therefore, an invitation to identify the persistence of colonialism in cultural institutions and simultaneously a discourse that calls for certain types of change in these institutions. However, looking more critically into claims of 'decolonization', one might not find much more than a number of deontological suggestions about ways to narrate exhibits or reflections on the legitimacy of museum work.

Beyond these strong epistemological claims, there are still important and objective consequences of colonialism for Western museums, some of which have been glossed over for years. The question of diversity in museums and how the museum can be an inclusive institution for an increasingly diverse population remains (Aldrich, 2009). Some of the issues pertaining to this debate have to do with the economic accessibility of culture, with artistic education, and with the resources necessary to support a more diverse workforce in the cultural sector. Another objective consequence of colonialism for museums has to do with collections and restitution. During the height of the colonial era (1750–1960), Western museums removed items of cultural significance from populations around the world, in effect contributing to cultural dispossession (Arvanitis & Tythacott, 2017; Cornu & Renold, 2010; Stumpe, 2005). The circulation of artefacts in colonial times is now being reexamined, with many nations demanding their return and museum professionals questioning the morality and/or legality of certain acquisitions (Smith, 2004).

From a theoretical perspective, this book is rooted in the institutionalist tradition in the humanities and social sciences. We are not documenting the discourse constructed around museums and attempting to track how it could have contributed to colonial ideology. Rather, this book posits colonialism as part of the environment in which museums have developed. We are not suggesting that museums have no link to colonialism; in fact, on the contrary, we believe that colonial structures have had an enabling and constraining effect on the development of museums. Our focus is not the production of ideology but rather the actors' strategies and practices in the context of colonial history, looking at how they have negotiated with colonial structures. Also, it should be noted that from an epistemological position, this book does not adopt a post-colonial perspective. In this book, 'post-colonial' refers to the historical period that marks the liberation and independence of different nations. By post-colonial, we mean the period that marks the national emancipation of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from foreign occupation, which contrasts with 'post-colonial theory' as the epistemological framework described above. In other words, this book deals with the social conditions, agents, and typical patterns of museum development that emerged from the colonial context, and opens to a reflection on these patterns in post-colonial times.

## 1.2 Museum-making

Museum-making focuses on the practices, strategies, and resources that agents mobilize to promote, develop, or change a museum institution. In formulating this more systematic definition of the concept, the literature that uses the expression is typically explicitly or implicitly institutionalist. Museum-making has to do with practices or a pattern of practices in developing the museum institution (Aronsson & Elgenius, 2011; Zabalueva, 2018). Museum-making is contextual, and arguably, considering the nature of museums and their infrastructures, has

a spatial dimension (Macleod et al., 2012). Museum-making is linked to agents and their attempts to create and shape an institution through conflict or collaboration (Dickson, 1986; Guevara, 2021; Kreps, 1998). As documented by institutional theorists, agents that create institutions generally negotiate a number of pressures; some are legal (or rely on other institutions or regulations), while others may be coercive (DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Anheier, 1990; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Other forces that might inform agents and their strategies are based on the emulation of the best characteristics of some institutions that are seen as model ones, which would suggest that there are pressures that lead to mimetic institutional behaviours, which is not uncommon in the museum sector. Often, major international institutions are formed as models of reference that inform agents' thinking and views on museums. Finally, other institutional pressures are normative; they are tied to social and professional values at the time (Dacin, 1997; Delbridge & Edwards, 2007; Zucker, 1987). While some pressures emphasize sameness and shape patterns for developing museums, and while these patterns may have a certain effect on the nature and the fabric of the museum institution, there are also possibilities for agents to innovate, to use resources from the environment to negotiate or subvert some of the institutional pressures that are exerted on them (Bagdadli & Paolino, 2006). Museum-making is often a balancing act between sameness and uniqueness (Beckert, 1999; Tolbert et al., 2011). Different patterns of organizations and institutions emerge from these different forces and from the strategies put together by agents (Beckert, 2010; Kondra & Hinings, 1998). This book looks into these institutional dynamics and tries to make sense of museum-making in the context of colonial Indochina.

Over the years, there has been a growing literature documenting the evolution of museums and museum culture in Asia in colonial and/or post-colonial contexts. When it comes to looking at patterns of museum-making in this part of the world, the literature points to a number of common forces at play in support of museums. European learned societies are often seen as the main force at play behind museum-making. In Indonesia, the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences (1778), a learned society, was formed by amateur scientists and intellectuals who developed collections in the colony (Boomgaard, 2006). The Asiatic Society (1784), with its many branches in the British Empire, is another crucial institution involved in museum-making, with a similar makeup of amateur scientists, intellectuals, and colonial administrators among its membership (Lewis, 2013). From these institutions and their efforts to engage with local cultures, many collections, archives, libraries, and museums emerged. In India, the Asiatic Society developed a museum in Calcutta in 1814 (Gupta, 2020), and later another one in Lahore in 1856 (Bhatti, 2012, p. 23). Similarly, this book points to the part played by a number of learned societies in museum-making in French Indochina, most notably the Society for Indochinese Studies, and more importantly the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO). That being said, to further our reflection on the role of these societies in more critical terms, one may also have to take

a step back and weigh in collecting practices that existed in the pre-colonial era. In Confucian tradition, scholars have often been behind collection development and engaged in their own pre-colonial forms of museum-making. As much as learned societies bring in some energy to develop museums, there has been, among local populations, a tradition of collection development that has meshed with the ideals of the museum, which is noticeable in French Indochina. The museum that developed from the imperial collections in Huê, in collaboration with a local learned society, is a very good case in point of the museum as an institution that is arguably more transnational than it is assumed to be.

Colonial administration is an unmistakably fundamental force in museum-making in Asia. In the mid-nineteenth century, Dutch, British, and French colonial administrations strengthened their support for museum development throughout Asia. In French Indochina, colonial administrators were the early champions of museum-making until the 1900s. While few projects survived, and while most of the museums were developed through collections amassed via missions, and from construction sites, some came much later, and the seminal collections of a few museums still survive to this date.

It should also be noted that the museum was equally an important tool for Japanese colonialism in the region. As reported by Wei-I (2007), Taipei's first modern museum was developed in 1899. This museum was developed by Japanese administrators and is an important indication that museums, as learned, scientific, and cultural institutions, also had a part to play in the Japanese expansion in Asia.

The development of a heritage consciousness among the colonial ruling class has constituted an essential moment for heritage-making. Decrees and policies to conserve historical sites have also contributed to sustaining the development of a culture of conservation, with its practices and institutions. Historical sites have been part of the ecology of museums. In India, the creation of the Archeological Survey and Viceroy George Curzon's heritage protection policy of 1904 have been important catalysts for the professionalization of heritage, announcing a turning point for the role of museums. In French Indochina, the creation of the Permanent Archeological Mission of Indochina in 1898, followed by the creation of heritage conservation legislation in 1900 by Governor General Paul Doumer, played a fundamental part in museum-making in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In 1900, the EFEO received more or less a monopoly on heritage and site conservation, giving rise to many new museum projects, and to a form of organization that was conducive to the elaboration of many institutions that later became national museums in the post-independence era. The heritage policy is arguably one of the most fundamental forces for museum-making in French Indochina.

This book discusses the role of these common agents for institutional development, but it also delves into different layers of museum-making. In addition to understanding the many protagonists and their contributions, this

book discusses the role of museum-making through collection development and through exhibits and audience work. These additional levels of analysis bring light to different dimensions of institutional development which are often overlooked, thus bringing forward more material for critical engagement with the very nature of these institutions and their place in colonial society. Finally, it should also be noted that this book offers material to better understand the development of museums and heritage institutions in the former French empire and in what is today known as the Francophone world. The experience of museum-making in French Indochina compares in part with the experience of museum-making in French parts of Africa; it compares when it comes to patterns of collection development by colonial authorities, but it also differs. The model of the Institut français d'Afrique noire (IFAN) and its place in museum-making differ from that of the EFEO in Asia. Arguably, and in ways similar to some museum-making practices in South Asia (Bhatti, 2012), the museum of French Indochina was primarily interested in archaeology, in arts history, and in the more contemporary period, in the decorative arts. Ethnography was practised but never developed strong roots in the colonial museums of French Indochina, and this disciplinary difference has also left profound imprints on museum collections, on their administration, and on the views of their contribution to colonial life.

### 1.3 Museum-making and French Indochina

So far, two important books have been published on heritage in French Indochina. Trinh Van Thao published *l'École française en Indochine* in 1995, an important book of historical references about the history of the EFEO. Trinh (1995) provides a number of crucial historical references about the life of the learned society. Following this publication, another important work was published on the history of the EFEO. Partly inspired by Foucault and Said, Pierre Singaravélou (1999) proposed a critical analysis of the institution. Pointing to some of its inconsistencies, and to some of its flaws, Singaravélou's work discusses the place of the EFEO in the broader social reflection about the development of a French 'orientalist science'. This work, which cursorily discusses the museum, remains a very relevant and significant critical analysis of the institution. It was republished in 2019. The resources remain relatively limited (see Delobel, 2005; le Brusq, 2007), and some of the most recent research published on museums in Indochina (Dias, 2014, 2017) focuses on ethnographic work and the development of ethnographic collections in France. While this is a part of the history of museums in Indochina, and while there was a short-lived ethnographic museum in Hanoi, ethnography was never a central focus of museum-making in French Indochina.

Through the notion of museum-making, this book aims to return the museums developed in colonial Indochina to the conversations taking place in Museum and Heritage Studies. The objective is to reflect on the practices and patterns that have emerged and that have shaped the museum institution

during colonial times. Chapter 2 of this book presents the context; it presents the construction of French Indochina as an incremental colonial construction. The construction of the French colony was the result of constant hesitation and political renegotiation. Additionally, in its first 50 years, Indochina encapsulated both the profound political turmoil of French domestic policies and its own reflection on its imperial future. French Indochina not only retains some of the principles and ideals of the first phase of colonization that developed under the Ancien Regime but also captures the transition of French imperialism. As such, this interpretation of the history of French Indochina represents an important coda from which we can understand some of the principles and norms at play in developing cultural institutions and ultimately museums. Looking at agents and processes, the third chapter presents museum-making and identifies different phases. Chapter 3 helps resituate the museum development process in a broader timeframe and in a view that also expands upon the usual reading that may tend to overly focus on the EFEO'S contribution. The role of colonial exhibitions in museum-making is discussed, as well as the role of commercial elites, which were an important force in early museum development. Colonial authorities, and of course the EFEO, also have their respective place in the analysis offered in this chapter.

In addition to this introduction, Chapters 2 and 3 offer much-needed synthesis to understand the life of museums in the region, as well as their historical origins. They present the context and the main ideas that circulated about the museum in these former French colonies. Chapters 4 through 6 propose an analysis building on another vantage point, one which values themes and practices that are consistent with the main functions of the museum as we have come to know it today. Chapter 4 discusses the role of these museums in heritage conservation. This chapter is an important one, and perhaps an essential contribution to the history of museums in the region. The heritage preservation function of the museums managed by the EFEO has been typically underplayed, and this dimension has rarely been given much attention in the existing literature, although it is a fundamental one. This chapter explains the context of heritage management in French Indochina; it presents the policies and structures that influenced museum-making, and it also presents the organization of the museum system in the region. Chapter 5 presents the history of these institutions from the angle of collections. Collection development and management are discussed. As for Chapter 6, the role and place of the public are discussed. This chapter reviews visitor statistics, as well as common professional discourses about the nature and place of the public in these institutions.

Finally, Chapter 7 acts as a conclusion, but it is also an opening. Chapter 7 bridges the end of the French colonial adventure in the region; it discusses the abrupt transitions in some cases and the early transformation of some of the most important colonial museums into new national museums. This chapter also discusses a number of hypotheses about new and emerging patterns of museum-making in post-colonial Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

## Note

- 1 Author supplied translation from the French original.

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# French Indochina as a colonial project

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## 2.1 An incremental project

Long before the arrival of the French, the Indochinese Peninsula was a place of imperial struggle. The territory now covered by Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia was coveted by many Asian empires; it was a territory at the juncture of many different imperial ambitions. The Dai Viêt, Khmers, Cham, and Chinese people have all vied for power over the region for centuries. The Lê, Trần, Lê, and Nguyễn dynasties have all attempted, with success on many occasions, to expand the boundaries of the Dai Viêt Empire from the north (Tonkin Region) to the south since the eleventh century (Than Khoi, 1983; Nguyen, 1999; Guillemot, 2018, p. 14). From the seventh to the fifteenth centuries (Sutherland, 2020, p. 2), the Cham developed their political organization and reigned over central and south Vietnam. The Khmers left their imprint on the region and their kingdom thrived between the ninth and fifteenth centuries (Peang-Meth, 1991). The temple of Angkor in Cambodia is certainly one of the most revealing pieces of heritage and one of the best testimonies of the cultural grandeur of the Khmer Empire. The reign of Jayavarman VII (reigned ca. 1182–1220), at the apogee of the Khmer Empire, remains a strong collective reference for contemporary Khmer culture and society (Coe, 2020, p. 440). Similarly, in 1353, many principalities united under Fa Ngum to create the Kingdom of Lan Xang (Le Boulanger, 1930), the first Lao kingdom. The history, archaeology, and myth surrounding these historical Lao kingdoms are still relevant for contemporary identity construction, for nation-building in Laos (Pholsena, 2006, pp. 77–78). Additionally, Thai, Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures and empires left their imprint on the cultural fabric of the peninsula centuries before Europeans began to make their presence felt.

As a colonial project, French Indochina sits between two important, yet distinctive, eras of French imperialism. The first imperial project<sup>1</sup> of France begins under the *Ancien Régime*<sup>2</sup>. Under the order of French King François I, French explorer Jacques Cartier set sail for the Americas in 1534, and thus began the first French colonial empire.<sup>3</sup> French settlements were created in eastern Canada, in the Antilles, and on the African continent (Island of Saint-Louis).

With the support of French minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the *Compagnie des Indes orientales* (French East India Company) was created and contributed to the development of a series of colonial settlements in the Indian Ocean and trade ports in Pondichéry (Puducherry) and Chandernagor (Chandannagar) in India. The Seven Years' War (1756–1763) marks a turning point, as after the Paris Treaty of 1763 France was stripped of many of its colonial possessions, giving room to the British influence in North America (Bédard, 2014) and India (Magedera, 2010). A second imperial era of France began under the Third Republic (1870–1940). According to Blanchard and Lemaire (2003), 'from 1871 to 1931 France moved away from being a hexagonal<sup>4</sup> society to an imperial environment' (p. 6); it is an era in which a colonial culture emerges, where France's own fabric and republican discourse mesh with imperial ambitions. Many elements came to shape France's colonial policy under the Third Republic. The quest for a favourable position in global trade and the opening of new markets are among the factors that defined France's policy. Additionally, developing a strategic position with its 'historical enemy', Britain, is also commonly identified as a factor that supported France's actions towards building its own empire (Bancel et al., 2003, p. 86). It is also under the Third Republic that France sat down with other world nations in the Berlin Conference (1884–1885) to decide the fate of the African continent. This new pattern of colonial exploitation that emerged in the 1870s began its rapid decline after France's occupation during the Second World War. This is not specific to France. In fact, the end of the war also marked the decline of most European empires. The year 1954 represents an important turning point for the French Empire. November 1954 saw the beginning of the Algerian War of Independence. A couple of months earlier, in July of the same year, the Geneva Conference put an end to the Indochina War and sealed the end of French Indochina. In 1960, most sub-Saharan French colonies achieved independence (Goerg, 2013).

French colonization – France's presence in what is today's Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia – began in a century that separates the end of France's first imperial moment, in 1763, and the beginning of its second one in 1870. The end of the Seven Years' War and the beginning of the Third Republic is an intermediary period, a century where different ideas, projects, and strategies overlap and are put to the test. In the last breath of the *Ancien Régime*, scientific expeditions were organized to explore the Pacific Ocean and its territories. French travel around the world of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville (between 1766 and 1769) is evocative of the place of science, technology, as well as exploration and new territories for the reconstruction of a French Empire. Likewise, Jean-François de la Pérouse's travels in the Pacific and the disappearance of his expedition along the shores of Vanikoro (Solomon Islands) took place in 1788, months before the first turmoil of the French Revolution. La Pérouse's expedition was the last one conducted under the *Ancien Régime*, but it also gave a pretence for the continuation of exploration in the Pacific region. In fact, the First French Republic voted to organize a search expedition

to retrieve La Pérouse and his fellows, an expedition that was led by Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux in 1791. With an order from Napoleon, Nicolas Baudin (1801), and many others after him, contributed to scientific expeditions in the Pacific region (Faivre, 1953, 1954; Fayaud, 2009; Harrison, 2009). Beyond these explorations in the Pacific, the end of the eighteenth century announces France's renewed interest in Europe and the Mediterranean region. Between 1798 and 1801, Napoleon Bonaparte leads the military and scientific campaign of Egypt. After being crowned emperor in 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte extended France's dominion over much of Western Europe. To give the full picture of this extension, in 1810 Rome and Amsterdam were both French territories, administered under French administrative rule (Broers et al., 2012). Amsterdam was part of a French department known as Zuyderzee, and Rome had been part of an administrative French unit named the Department of Tiber in 1809 (Tulard, 1997). Both were integrated as regular territories of the French Empire (1804–1814). France's ambitions in the Mediterranean region took a new turn after the restoration of the monarchy in 1815, and with the campaign of Algeria initiated by King Charles X in 1830. Under King Louis Philippe I, the French Empire developed in Guinea, Madagascar, and the Pacific region (Schefer, 1912, p. 153).

As a colonial project, French Indochina was first shaped by the forces and the weaknesses that characterized the ambivalences and hesitations of French colonialism for the proceeding century (Brocheux & Hémery, 2001). France's influence in the region can be traced back to the presence of Catholic missionaries, and to the presence of merchants and explorers that dates back to the *Ancien Régime*. France's presence in the area was informed by these old networks. The military conquest of the territory began in 1858, under the Second Empire (1852–1870), mostly as attempts to force trade and establish a commercial presence to reach Chinese markets. The establishment of a strong and permanent presence for France in this land afar was met with hesitation by Napoleon III, who was then ruler. Political pressures and commercial interests gained the favour of the emperor. Later, and for a long time, French Indochina was also subjected to the new colonial ideals and policies of the Third Republic (1870–1940). As a result, French Indochina is an incremental construction, a colonial project that was distinctively shaped and reshaped by a wide variety of ideals, principles, and conditions that changed over time. French Indochina, as a colonial project, encapsulated many of the transitional elements that characterized the colonial practices that preceded the new imperial logic that had gained heft since 1870.

## 2.2 The conquest of the territory

The term 'Indochina' was coined by French-Danish geographer Conrad Malte-Brun, who devised the geographical expression and communicated it for the first time in 1804 (Hémery, 2000, p. 138). This geographical construction of a zone between India and China has since informed how the region

is known, described and labelled by many Europeans. Politically, French Indochina was carved out of five territories: Cochinchina (southern Vietnam), Tonkin (northern Vietnam), the protectorate of Annam Protectorate (central Vietnam), and the protectorates of Laos and Cambodia. French Indochina is the result of the amalgamation of these five territories into a single colonial entity. The conquest of these different territories relies on old political relationships, on diplomacy, and on military action. In this section, we discuss how missionaries, scientific expeditions, and militaries have, incrementally, come together to support the construction of French Indochina, bringing fundamental pieces to sustain its colonial architecture along the way. Some of these forces came and overlapped with one another. It is, in fact, very difficult to completely untangle expedition missions and military expeditions, or diplomatic missions, as these different activities often fed into or relied on one another, in concerted action.

### 2.2.1 Missionaries

French missionaries were among the first to develop cultural relations in the region. French and Portuguese missionaries based in Malacca were among the first to attempt to evangelize populations in Cambodia and Vietnam, and spread Christianity in the region. By 1550, there were already many Portuguese missions in Asia, and Malacca, in today's Malaysia, was an important base from which missionaries organized the first missions to Cambodia and Vietnam (Louvert, 1885, p. 223). In 1585, Georges de la Motte was the first French missionary who embarked on an evangelization mission in Cambodia (p. 226). Many others followed, including the Jesuit father Alexandre de Rhodes,<sup>5</sup> who is often seen as the first strong intercultural link between France and Vietnam for his translation work. From his voyages in Vietnam in the 1620s and 1640s, the Avignon-born Jesuit wrote a dictionary to help translate 'Annamite' (Vietnamese) into Portuguese and Latin (Guillemin, 2014, p. 146). De Rhodes's dictionary is eventually enriched by another French missionary – Pierre Pigneau de Behaine (1741–1799) – who also contributed to the romanization of Vietnamese. The result was another Annamite/Latin dictionary from the work of the Behaine published posthumously in 1838. In 1868, Legrand de la Liraye edited his *Dictionnaire élémentaire annamite-français*, the first direct and widely circulated translation instrument between Vietnamese and French (p. 149). Over time, both the Portuguese and French have furthered the romanizing of Vietnamese language<sup>6</sup> by contributing to the development of a writing system known as *Quốc Ngữ* (quoc ngu) (Jacques, 1998, p. 21). Missionaries<sup>7</sup> have left an important cultural and historical imprint on the region.

French missionaries did not only promote the development of Christian faith but also contributed to the cultural knowledge of France in the region. Arguably, they have had more success than many merchants. As we are reminded by Charles-Émile Bouillevaux, French merchant Pierre Poivre, who

was sent to Huê to negotiate a commercial treaty for Louis XV in 1749, was met with resistance and was unsuccessful (Bouillevaux, 1858, p. 65). Missionaries fared better in developing political relations for France. In fact, Abbé Pigneau de Behaine was instrumental in developing diplomatic relationships between the King of France, Louis XVI and the future Emperor Gia Long. According to Abel (1864) in his book *La question de la Cochinchine au point e vue des intérêts français* [The Question of Cochinchina from the Perspective of French Interests], Pigneau de Behaine was a very influential advisor to the French court, and an equally important advisor to Nguyen-anh, who took the name Gia Long for his reign (p. 7). Pigneau de Behaine was behind a plan where France had agreed to send troops to restore Nguyen-anh's crown and to help him fight the Tây Son rebellion (Guillemot, 2018, p. 19). A treaty was concluded with France on November 28, 1787 (Bouillevaux, 1858, p. 70). The French would provide military assistance to Nguyen-anh in exchange for trade rights, trading ports, and military support against British invasions of French installations or interests. In 1789, the French Revolution halted France's support to Nguyen-anh, but nonetheless, Pigneau de Behaine honoured his words and tried to gather as many resources as possible to provide the promised military assistance. He convinced 20 French military officers who gathered further resources and provided technical assistance to the future Emperor Gia Long (p. 71).

Beyond the *Ancien Régime*, missionaries had a long-standing influence throughout colonization. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the missionaries' spiritual work, their educational and cultural activities in the region, were catalysts of French colonial society in Indochina. French missionaries also helped to develop a cultural imaginary of Indochina in the metropolis. This is the case with Charles-Émile Bouillevaux. In 1850, Bouillevaux was one of the first French explorers to visit the ruins of Angkor and followed the path of previous European (Portuguese) explorers who visited the area in the sixteenth century. Bouillevaux published three important manuscripts from these travels that circulated in France in the late nineteenth century. Ten years after Bouillevaux, French explorer Henri Mouhot visited Angkor and published *Voyage dans les royaumes de Siam, de Cambodge, de Laos et autres parties centrales de l'Indochine* in 1863, a book that provides an account of his travels. In 1874, Charles-Émile Bouillevaux published a book recollecting his travels in central Vietnam and Cambodia. As he relates his visit and describes the Temple of Angkor, Bouillevaux situates his own encounter with the temple in terms that are strikingly at odds with most common views of the colonial mind:

Before<sup>8</sup> going further, we may protest against a certain system of exaggeration and charlatanism. One pretends to have made precious discoveries in Cambodia and in other places. Most of these discoveries were known for a very long time. For instance, the Angkor pagoda and the Angkor-Thom ruins were not being rediscovered by Mouhot, as it is

often said, for the good reason that they were never lost. Missionaries have known them and have reported on them for a long time. Portuguese travelers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century had visited them, and finally they have been mentioned in Chinese chronicles of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Mouhot saw Angkor after many others, and in particular, after me. His highly publicized travels have made this country known to many readers. As for the offices of the Mekong Expedition, M. de Lagrée in particular, they studied monuments in a certain way, and provided interesting description. This is true... But, let's not exaggerate anything....

(Bouillevaux, 1874, p. 131)

This excerpt from Bouillevaux's travel account is revealing of some important dimensions of life and culture during the colonial era. First, this excerpt reveals the importance of contacts with the colonial world and its social and symbolic value in the metropolis. In questioning the public discourse that made French explorer Henri Mouhot the discoverer of Angkor, Bouillevaux tries to re-legitimize his own travel a decade before Mouhot. The second dimension revealed in this passage is an attempt to relativize French exploration, and recognize the place of Portuguese and Chinese explorers in the region. More importantly perhaps, Bouillevaux reminds his readers that Angkor was well known by locals and that it had never been lost. This affirmation has important cultural value as it helps today's historians move away from overly caricatural descriptions of public discourse in the colonial era. Finally, this excerpt also reveals the social and cultural importance of organized and subsidized exploration missions during the colonial era, on which Bouillevaux expresses himself with scepticism. Nonetheless, this passage also speaks to the social and cultural influence of exploration missions and their important place in the construction of a colonial order.

### 2.2.2 A military conquest

Religious and commercial interests have been the predominant influences that made the colonization of Indochina part of the political agenda of the Second Empire in France. In the 1850s, missionaries began to see a change in attitude and found growing reluctance to Christianity in Emperor Tu Duc's court. Influential missionaries and religious figures in France, such as Bishop Pellerin, lobbied Napoléon III for a military intervention in support of the French, Spanish, and Portuguese missions. In 1857, the decapitation of a Spanish missionary, Father Diaz, was an element that created the necessary *casus belli* (Taboulet, 1954, p. 292) for the European powers to venture into the region. It has been reported that the French emperor's wife, Empress Eugénie, was profoundly hurt by the news of Diaz's death as she knew him personally from her youth in Spain, and in response she reportedly said, 'We need to avenge our martyrs, this will be my war' (p. 293). Religious motives certainly carry weight in favour of a military expedition (Hanh, 1969). Religious affairs

always intermingled with other issues at stake. The execution of French Abbé Auguste Chapdelaine in Guanxi (China) in 1856 is often described as the event that brought France to join forces with the British during the Second Opium War (Wong, 2000, p. 133). Again, from either side, these assassinations tend to be pretences, a way to symbolically mark the end of diplomacy.

For a number of reasons, France's commercial interests in Asia were an even more important factor that contributed to France's intervention in the region. First, shipbuilders, industrialists in the weaving industry, more precisely silk merchants of Lyon (Klein, 2005; Clerc, 2016), and other influential industrialists exerted continuous pressure on Emperor Napoléon III for assistance in developing and opening Asian markets, and imposing their interests through military force (Cordier, 1911; Klein, 1994; Sasges, 2015). Second, France vessels and military forces were already present in the region in 1857. In fact, in 1856, with the assistance of France, the British invaded the Chinese trading port of Canton (Guangzhou). France's participation in the Second Opium War (Roux, 2016) attracted further troops and vessels to the region. In 1857, an ambassador, Charles de Montigny, was sent by the Second Empire and failed in his attempt to secure rights for French trade on the coast of Vietnam (Nguyễn, 2014, p. 135). After this failed attempt at diplomacy, war became the only option. And in 1857, after bombarding the port of Canton, the French admiral Rigault de Genouilly received instruction to attack and invade Danang (Cordier, 1911, pp. 157–158).

The attacks on Danang on the coast of central Vietnam began on August 31, 1858, and opened a war that lasted until 1884 (Nguyen, 1999, p. 151). In 1859, French troops occupied Saigon. In 1861, additional troops were freed at the end of the French military campaign in China, which garnished the troops that were already on the field. By 1862, Cochinchina was occupied by the French troops, not without confronting strong resistance. Between 1860 and 1864, Truong Dinh, a Vietnamese insurrectionist, vigorously fought French troops in the vicinity of Saigon, with the 6000 troops of local fighters he was able to garner and organize (p. 155). In 1862, Emperor Tu Duc, weakened by previous wars to secure his empire in the previous decades, decided to sign a peace treaty that was more accurately a ceasefire and ceded some of his provinces to the French (Meyer, 1985, pp. 44–45). Tu Duc tried the diplomatic route and sent his own ambassador, Phan Thanh Gian, to France in 1863 in order to recuperate the ceded territories, but he was unsuccessful in his efforts. At the time, Indochina was not a priority of the imperial policy of Napoléon III. The expeditions in Cochinchina were costly and the Second Empire was also set back by unsuccessful expeditions in Mexico in the 1860s (Nguyễn, 2014, p. 156). It took a group of advocates to convince Napoléon III of the commercial and strategic interest of Indochina. The Minister of the Navy and Admiral Chasseloup-Laubat was among the enthusiasts who strongly believed that France had a destiny in Indochina (Vorapeth, 2004). For Nguyễn (2014), the admiral Chasseloup-Laubat was not only influential, he was one of the main architects of France's colonial policy (p. 148). French

marine officers and admirals had a strong leadership role in the military campaign, and a strong imprint on the early days of the French implantation in the region; marine officers commanded the construction of the first administration of the French government in 1862 in Cochinchina (Meyer, 1985, pp. 45–46) as war and insurrection were raging throughout the country.

In 1868, a new military campaign was organized to extend the French domination over new territories. The military conquest continued under a new regime, the Third Republic. Admiral Dupré tried to organize a military mission in Tonkin in 1872 but was stopped by the government of President Adolphe Thiers, who was not favourable to further military action in the Far East (Meyer, 1985, p. 68). As explained by many commentators and historians (Gomane, 1994; Laffey, 1975; Villemagne, 2003, 2013) of early colonial Indochina, naval commanders were, in a certain sense, in charge of the administration of the colony, and benefited from the support of merchants from Bordeaux and Lyon, who wanted greater access to new markets.

In 1873,<sup>9</sup> French officer Francis Garnier led an assault against Hanoi and offered a military victory to the French against General Nguyen Tri Phuong (Nguyen, 1999, p. 160). Officer Francis Garnier was not only the military officer that led a French victory in Tonkin, he was also part of the network of merchants and marine officers who had been strongly advocating for a military presence for the French in the Far East, and more particularly in Indochina. He was a famous figure of colonial life; he had been part of exploration missions that further supported his fame, and his military exploits had given him a place in the heritage making of early colonial life. Francis Garnier perished after an ambush that was organized shortly after the occupation of Hanoi in December 1873 (Valette, 1969). In 1874, a treaty was negotiated (*Traité Philastre*) between France and the Nguyen Dynasty, where Tu Duc was able to recuperate Hanoi, while the French secured a strategic position in the region and trade rights on the Red River (Nguyen, 1971). This treaty was violated by the French in 1882, and the French proceeded to invade Hanoi on April 25. This invasion and violation of the treaty of 1874 led to the suicide of Hanoi governor Hoang Dieu (Nguyen, 1999, p. 161). That being said, as Nguyen Khac Vien reminds us, the invaders met a resistance in Hanoi comparable in strength to that seen for the invasion led by Francis Garnier in 1873. In ways similar to the fight of 1873, in this second invasion of Hanoi, the French lost one of their most important military leaders, Henri Rivière, to the hands of the resistance (Nguyen, 1999, p. 162). In other words, French invaders were met with fierce resistance.

The year 1883 was an important turning point; it saw Emperor Tu Duc dying with no clear inheritor, with a court where disarray and confusion reigned (Nguyen, 1999, p. 162). On August 25, 1883, French ambassador Jules Harmand signed a treaty (*Traité Harmand*) with the imperial court that made Annam and Tonkin French protectorates (Fourniau, 1971, p. 408). Another treaty was signed in 1884, and in 1885, China recognized the French protectorate over Vietnam (Guillemot, 2018, p. 24). The year 1885 is commonly identified as the end of the military conquest. Of course, this does not mean that the Vietnamese

population has passively accepted their new rulers. In fact, insurrections and resistance to the invasion were organized and sustained for decades. According to Vietnamese historian Nguyen Khac Vien, the success of the French military invasion was not strictly due to its own tactical prowess; it was also aided by the imperial court's own state of disorganization. For Nguyen (1999), between 1861 and 1897 the monarchy was 'paralyzed by its mandarin bureaucracy' and by inner fights that plagued the unity of the nation (pp. 169–170).

The process and history of the integration of Laos and Cambodia under French rule differ slightly from the military conquest of the three Vietnamese territories (Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin), but at the same time, the installation of French colonial administration is also intimately tied to the military action that developed in neighbouring Vietnam. The Kingdom of Cambodia was geographically and strategically situated between two empires that constantly represented threats to its independence. Siam (Thailand) and Annam (Vietnam) were rivals and had occasionally quarrelled over Cambodian provinces (Chandler, 2005, p. 41). The French protectorate over Cambodia was secured through diplomatic channels. The French tried to limit British influence in the region; they also tried to limit the place of Siam and strategically secure their colonial conquest in neighbouring Cochinchina. The visit of French consul Charles de Montigny in 1855 in Bangkok was the first of many diplomatic attempts to acquire Cambodia, which had suzerainty links with both Siam and Annam. Vice-admiral Pierre-Paul de La Grandière signed a treaty directly with King Norodom in July 1863 and the protectorate was communicated to the court of Siam by French diplomats in 1864 (Thomson, 1945). On March 23, 1907, France acquired by treaty from Siam two remaining Cambodian provinces – Battambang and Siem Reap – provinces that had been claimed by Siam until then.

Laos was officially integrated into French Indochina as a protectorate in 1893. The French wars against Annam, as well as the British conquest of Burma, had profoundly destabilized the forces in the region in ways that were strategically favourable for Siam (Phinith et al., 1998, p. 76). In the early nineteenth century, Siam had already begun to assert its influence in the region. From 1828 to 1832, it conducted military campaigns that led to the destruction of the Kingdom of Vientiane (Briggs, 1946, p. 444). The European powers not only created a disequilibrium in the regional power structure, they also competed to establish their own spheres of influence. The sympathy of King Rama V (Chulalongkorn) of Siam for the British, as well as the British presence in Burma in regions adjacent to Tonkin, created strategic risks for the French colony. In 1887 and 1888, the French sent explorer Auguste Pavie to persuade Laotian leaders of the benefits of French protection (p. 445). In 1893, after securing an agreement with the Laotian leaders, the French positioned two warships in Bangkok's harbour to exert pressure on Siam, whose king later signed the agreement and recognized French authority over Laos (Phinith et al., 1998, p. 78). The incorporation of Laos in 1893 completed the geographic (and military) construction of French Indochina.

### 2.2.3 Early exploration missions

It can also be said that the territory was conquered by exploration missions with scientific purposes. Many important missions have been organized by the colonial state to offer a better grasp of the environment, and to gain a better command of the geography and culture of the region. Commercial and military interests converged with scientific ones. Paying closer attention to these different missions reveals how these different interests (military, commercial, and scientific) commonly intersected. Arguably, three missions have defined the fate and development of French Indochina: the Mekong exploration mission (1866–1868), the Delaporte mission (1873), and the Pavie mission, which can be said to be more than one mission, spanned over four periods and trips realized between 1879 and 1895. It is also interesting to note that these missions were not only carried out in a period of peace but also that their timeline overlaps with the timeline of a number of military and diplomatic operations, with which they were inextricably linked.

European explorers have travelled in Indochina for centuries. As we have mentioned already, Charles-Émile Bouillevaux's missionary work in the region in the mid-nineteenth century, or Henri Mouhot's scientific travels and visit to the Angkor temple in 1860, speak to the important and recurring presence of European explorers in the region. By contrast, the Mekong exploration mission that began in 1866 was sponsored by the colonial government of Cochinchina; it was sponsored by the colonial state and gathered an interdisciplinary team and important resources. This expedition was led by Captain Ernest Doudart de Lagrée, who was seconded by Officer Francis Garnier. The two-year-long expedition aimed to survey Mekong with the hope that it could serve as a commercial route to help the colony prosper economically. From this expedition, very few documents survived Doudart de Lagrée's request to burn the papers as he became ill and died during the expedition in 1868. According to Georges Taboulet, Doudart de Lagrée had said to his fellow adventurers that 'the work of a man can only be achieved by himself' (Taboulet, 1970, p. 8). Fortunately, many other team members have reported on this expedition, providing solid historical evidence. For French historian Jacques Valette (1972), the mission was strategically motivated by three elements: the quest for access to China and the Chinese market; the desire to find resources that would further support French industry and trade in Asia; and, finally, military and strategic interests with regards to Siam and its imperialistic views of other parts of Indochina, and Laos in particular. According to Valette, the admiral de La Grandière, who was governor of Cochinchina, and Chasseloup-Laubat, who was Minister of the Navy, realized how essential this mission was. In fact, at the time, the only information that the administration had on the territory it governed was from a vulgarization atlas largely based on some accounts, such as Henri Mouhot's (p. 348). The expedition was, therefore, subsidized by the colonial authorities and known then not so much as the expedition as the 'commission' (*Commission du Mékong*).

Based on a note produced by Francis Garnier for the *Bulletin de la société de géographie* in 1869, the expedition had explored 9960 kilometres of new territory; 5870 kilometres were explored by boat, and 3990 kilometres were explored by foot (Garnier, 1869, p. 109). The geologist of the commission, M. Joubert, and the naturalist M. Thorel, collected specimens in such number that they had to stop and could not collect any other item after Luang Prabang as they lacked storage (p. 113). The expedition collected information on temples<sup>10</sup> and on 26 dialects; they recorded epigraphic inscriptions, and more importantly, the coordinates of many rivers and streams of the Mekong basin. The expedition also had a photographer, Emile Gsell (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). According to Valette, the navigability of the Red River from Tonkin to Yunnan is most certainly one of the most crucial discoveries of this expedition (Valette, 1972, p. 371). In general, it is also in Jacques Valette's view that what was learned in this expedition oriented and structured the French approach to colonization in Indochina for the remainder of the nineteenth century (p. 347).

A second important mission of the early days of Indochina was that of Louis Delaporte. A member of the Mekong exploration mission of 1866, the officer produced many drawings and sketches of temples. The beauty of the Angkor temple attracted the attention of and became an obsession for the officer. He contacted the new Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts of the Third Republic, as well as the French Society of Geography, in order to gather the resources necessary to fund his trip back to Angkor (Falser, 2020,



Figure 2.1 View from the Imperial Post Office (Saigon) 1866.

Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gilman Collection, Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2005