

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

From the Port to the World

*A Global History
of Indochinese Ports
(1858-1956)*

*ĐÀ NẴNG, VIỆT NAM
27-28/10/2022*



René Tétard, Tourane (Đà Nẵng) "market" train station, 1920's. FRANOM 30Fi115/26.

Abstract

In order to pave the way for the writing of a global history of Indochinese ports under colonial rule, a two-day international conference will be held October 27-28, 2022 at the University of Sciences and Education – University of Đà Nẵng in Việt Nam. By bringing together researchers from Việt Nam, France and beyond, this conference will aim to establish the current state of research on a question that remains largely unexplored. It will address the ports of the Indochinese Union (Việt Nam, Laos, Cambodia) in all their aspects (colonial and imperial, economic, social and cultural, military and strategic, etc.), at the crossroads of different historiographies, different disciplines, and with a comparative approach in mind. Moreover, the conference hopes to foster new perspectives on these singular spaces, situated in a land-sea *continuum* and whose trajectories of development did not end with the decolonization of French Indochina. At a time when the maritimization of the world continues to accelerate, and when exports are becoming a major lever of development for Southeast Asian economies (particularly for Việt Nam), a historical study of former colonial ports can provide useful insights into understanding current issues, whether in terms of port infrastructures, geostrategy, or regional economic development and positioning in the globalization of trade. Therefore, the debate will not be limited to the colonial period, even if this will constitute the core of the program; instead, the conference will endeavor both to introduce the region's pre-colonial port realities and to bridge the gap between the colonial and postcolonial by including port projects developed on the Vietnamese coastline after the country's independence.

Notice

1. General presentation of the project

Ports, the quintessential sites of “naval imperialism”¹, were essential to the progressive colonization of French Indochina. As places where warships and merchants could anchor and set up trading posts, as well as a gateway for European and Asian diplomats, missionaries and merchants from the 16th century onwards, the Eastern ports of the Indochinese peninsula allowed French colonial power to be imposed in East Asia: firstly, in Tourane (Đà Nẵng), a military base for the Franco-Spanish expeditionary corps and the naval division in the China Seas between September 1858 and March 1860; then in Sài Gòn, a free port from 1860 and a support and supply base for the conquest of Cochinchina; and lastly in Hải Phòng, a colonial creation that became a military and commercial bridgehead that facilitated the conquest of Tonkin starting in the early 1870s. In addition to serving the imperial state and its ambitions, these ports were also essential to the interests of French and international business circles, becoming crucial cornerstones for the French entry into an “Asian Mediterranean”²; a place of complex connections between civilizations, where Asian and Western trade networks were structured and intermingled.

As “matrices” of colonization, “ports in colonial context”³ also offer valuable lenses for scholars that study the phenomenon of colonialism and the construction of colonial societies. Mediating between metropolises and imperial territories, ports stand out as “in-between” spaces defined by an interface between port societies under construction and pre-existent local societies placed under colonial rule. As “contact zones”⁴ that bring into focus the “hegemonic transaction”⁵ of the “colonial moment”, colonial port-cities constitute fertile ground for analyzing relations between the colonizer and the colonized, the native and the outsider, and the production of a hybrid society⁶ that maintains more or less active ties with the rest of the world. Indochinese ports are a singular object of study; they can be applied to all scales of connectivity, to the French empire, to other colonial empires, and to the wider Asia-Pacific.

Nevertheless, these complex environments, within which new relations of domination were constructed from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, have received very little attention from historians and other researchers in the humanities and social sciences. Over the past decade, important efforts have been made to bring the fields of colonial history and imperial history into dialogue with that of maritime and port history. Surprisingly, however, within this emerging historiography, very few works are specifically dedicated to Indochinese ports.⁷ Two exhibitions recently organized in France have highlighted part of the maritime history of French Indochina⁸, but nothing specific has yet been done on the subject of

¹ Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochine, la colonisation ambiguë, 1858-1954*, Paris: La Découverte, 1995, p. 29.

² François Gipouloux, *The Asian Mediterranean: Port Cities and Trading Networks in China, Japan and Southeast Asia, 13th-21st Century*, Cheltenham/Northampton, MA, Edward Elgar Pub., 2011, 407 p.

³ Jean-François Klein and Bruno Marnot (eds.), *Les Européens dans les ports en situation coloniale (XVI^e-XX^e siècle)*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes (PUR), 2014, 170 p.

⁴ Mary-Louise Pratt, « Arts of the Contact Zone », *Profession*, 1991, p. 33–40.

⁵ Jean-François Bayart and Romain Bertrand, « De quel “legs colonial” parle-t-on », *Esprit*, n° 12, 2006, p. 134–60.

⁶ Caroline Herbelin, *Architectures du Vietnam colonial. Repenser le métissage*, Paris: CTHS-INHA, 2016, 367 p.

⁷ So far, the two main Indochinese ports — Sài Gòn and Hải Phòng — have been the main focus of historians. See in particular the PhD theses of Gilles Raffi and Trần Văn Kiên on the city-port of Hải Phòng and the conference “Saigon, témoin de l'histoire à travers les archives”, organised by the Service Historique de la Défense and the Institut d'Asie Orientale (Vincennes, May 21st, 2019). Also worth mentioning is Sunny Le Galloudec's PhD dissertation, currently in progress, which is dedicated to the history of the former French concession and city-port of Tourane (present-day Đà Nẵng, in central Việt Nam): using new archives material, its author adopts a comparative approach with the other ports of the Indochinese Union. About Đà Nẵng history, only two monographic approaches have been carried out so far: Ngô Văn Minh *et al.*, *Lịch sử Đà Nẵng (1858-1945)*, Đà Nẵng, NXB Đà Nẵng, 2007, 334 p.; Võ Văn Đạt, *Lịch sử Đà Nẵng (1306-1975)*, Hà Nội/T.p. Hồ Chí Minh, NXB Hồng Đức/Như Books, 2019, 386 p.

⁸ *Les Marins, la Marine et l'Indochine. 1856–1956*, an exhibition organized by the Service historique de la Défense (SHD) in partnership with IRASIA, November 2017–February 2018 (curated by Cyril Canet and Nguyễn Quốc Thanh); *L'Indochine et*

Indochinese ports themselves. Regarding the colonial period, no collaboration has been implemented between scholars in France and Việt Nam on these issues despite abundant sources and genuine interest in mobilizing them.

Consequently, this international conference will have three main ambitions: to contribute to filling the gap in the historiography; to adopt a globalized approach to Indochinese ports, much like what Bruno Marnot has endeavored for the major French commercial ports⁹; and finally, to go beyond monographic studies while reinforcing discussions between historiographies and researchers, all in a multidisciplinary manner.

Comparative approaches will therefore be particularly welcome, as will studies devoted to the small coastal ports of Indochina, the importance of which has been wholly neglected compared to the larger ports. Finally, we feel it is essential to welcome papers devoted to the pre-colonial history of these ports, as well as to their more recent realities.

Given the broad scope of the questions that the conference hopes to address, we would like to propose the following themes to structure the overall debate. These are meant as a reference only and we welcome all submissions that seek to contribute to the conference's central aims.

2. Proposed themes

- *The role of Indochinese ports within the process of colonization and exerting control over coveted territories, not only in a military sense, but also in the sense of policing and law enforcement.* Indochinese ports will be considered from a military and (geo)strategic point of view, if possible in a multi-scalar manner, both during the period of colonial settlement as well as during the conflicts that marked the colonial period (e.g. Pacific War, First Indochina War).¹⁰

- *The role that economic exchange plays in the history of Indochinese ports.* Particular attention will be paid to port's commercial zones of influence, i.e. the port hinterland and foreland, the port economy (local and/or "Indochinese"), and the flow of goods (legal or smuggled). By extension, this conference's economic dimension will take into account the important issue of the development of port and land communication infrastructures (projects, achievements, failures, financing, etc.).¹¹ This issue is made even more crucial by the fact that the Indochinese peninsula concentrated most of the materials necessary for infrastructure projects undertaken both for the economic development of the Indochinese Union and to extend control over more remote territories (Indochina and Yunnan Railways, colonial roads, and engineering works). Finally, it is important to take into account maritime and shipping companies, which largely contributed to connecting Indochinese ports and inserting them into the regional, imperial and trans-imperial economic circuits.

la mer (1858–1954), an exhibition co-organized by IRASIA and the Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM), in collaboration with the SHD and on the initiative of Nguyễn Quốc Thanh (September–November 2018); the exhibition and catalogue coordinated by Christophe Bertrand, Caroline Herbelin and Jean-François Klein, *Indochine : Des territoires et des hommes 1858–1956*, Paris: Gallimard/Musée de l'Armée, 2013, had already given an important place to these pivotal sites.

⁹ Bruno Marnot, *Les grands ports de commerce français et la mondialisation au XIX^e siècle*, Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2011, 589 p.

¹⁰ Including presentations focusing on the military bases installed inside or near strategic ports during the First Indochina War (1946–1954), as well as on the ports-arsenals (of Sài Gòn and of Hải Phòng in particular) – knowing these latter are the focus of a new research dynamic since the beginning of the 2000s (see, for instance: Comité pour l'histoire de l'armement/SHM, *Les bases et les arsenaux français d'Outre-mer, du Second Empire à nos jours*, Paris, Lavauzelle, 2002, 396 p.).

¹¹ The question of port financing (and port engineering), in times of peace, crisis, conflict or war, must be considered, both during the colonial period and after French colonization and the final withdrawal of the French Far East Expeditionary Corps (CEFEQ) in 1956. We also invite future speakers to consider the issue of port governance, whether civil or military, inter-ministerial or inter-armed forces. Taking a look into these different issues will help measuring the consequences armed conflicts might have on these ports: have they marked a parenthesis or a break in the activity of the Indochinese ports, in their management and/or in terms of funding relating to their planning and to their development?

- *The complexity of Indochinese urban port societies.* The conference will examine the modalities and nature of their urban and port development (spatial cohabitation/segregation; conflicts in the sharing of space between civilians and the military) and the social diversity of their populations. The cosmopolitan character of these interfaces will therefore be considered, with a close look at the relationships that French colonists maintained among themselves, but also, and above all, with the Vietnamese populations, the Chinese congregations (Bang - 幫), and the labor force (hired coolies and stevedores, for example). This section may also include papers that address strikes and anti-colonial struggles that developed in or carried out from the ports.

- *Cultural history and representations of Indochinese ports.* A final dimension, equally important for a global history of Indochinese ports, will be to consider these environments through the notions of the “social imaginary” and the “colonial imaginary”, and to identify more clearly their place within sources as diverse as literature, the press, painting, photography, and propaganda posters. This multidisciplinary component could also integrate a more contemporary dimension, that of port heritage, as well as colonial and post-colonial legacies.

3. How to contribute, practical information

Proposals for papers should be sent by email before **December 31st, 2021**, to **indoports.contact@gmail.com**. Proposals should consist of a (provisional) title and an abstract that is **2500–3000 characters in length**. Proposals should be accompanied by a short **CV that lists the submitter’s main publications**.

A reply will be given to participants by **February 15th, 2022**. Selected participants should submit completed papers (about **30, 000 characters long**) along with a short abstract in English by **July 31st, 2022**, at the latest, so that papers can be translated for publication, upon selection, in the conference proceedings. We plan to publish in French and Vietnamese, in collaboration with an internationally recognized publishing house.

Selected papers for the conference will eventually be grouped into thematic panels. The authors concerned will be informed.

Finally, the organizers have opted for a hybrid conference format that will take place both in person and online. Therefore, speakers who cannot travel to Việt Nam will not be excluded from the program. Modalities concerning travel and accommodation expenses will be shared later, once the selection of speakers has been made official.

4. Organizing Committee

Sunny Le Galloudec (PhD candidate in History, UMR IDEES 6266 - Le Havre, University of Le Havre Normandie): organization and coordination

- **Dominique Barjot** (Professor emeritus of Modern Economic History at the University of Paris-Sorbonne, Vice-President of the 2nd section of the Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer)
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- **Vũ Thị Minh Hương** (PhD in History, former Director General of the State Archives of Vietnam, from 2008 to 2015)

Dates and place

October 27-28, 2022 (+ a cultural day tour on October 29th, 2022)

University of Sciences and Education – University of Đà Nẵng (Việt Nam)

Keywords

Ports; Port cities; Indochina; Vietnam; Việt Nam; Laos; Cambodia; Southeast Asia; History; Maritime; Colonization; Empire; Globalization; Migrations

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