Postcards from the Edge of Empire: Images and Messages from French Indochina

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Fig 1: (Card#68 Una Bayadere Annamite: Sortie de bain d 'une jeune femme annamite). The text, composed on April 17, 1908, reads on top of the image "Ni formes, ni couleurs! Rien de beau chez elle!" ("No form and no colour! Nothing beautiful about her!") On the back: "My dear Jane, I prefer to send you a few examples of this stunning collection. You will thus be able to judge for yourself the women who are represented on these cards. I agree with you: these yellow skins do not appeal to me at all! Oh, when will I be able to see again the pale faces of the pretty women in France!" The eroticized image is a way of flirting and teasing the young woman it is addressed to, giving her a frisson of the temptations of the Orient, while apparently assuring her of the writer's fidelity.

Postcards from French colonies are sold today as nostalgic evocations of a vanished world. The erotic, opium-infused images of Indochina have been particularly popular since the elegant fiction of exotic utopia they depict was carefully constructed to justify the colonial enteprise[1]

Colonial postcards are often published and critiqued for their racist and propagandistic content, but the ethnographic value of the postcard has been neglected, as has the content of the messages printed on the other side. Including messages in the analysis amplifies and complicates the visual tendency to stereotype, exoticise and, at times, demonise. There is sometimes a synergistic consonance between image and message, at other times an unconscious, ironic or metaphoric dissonance.

A reading of colonial postcards from both sides, especially large collections like the 2,617 postcards in the Getty Cultural Exchanges Archive, suggests that we need to return them to the dialogical context in which they were first sent. Rather than reading them as aspects of a totalizing 'colonial gaze', we particularize the gaze, and recognize subtle variations in its content. The caption offers an official guide to interpreting the image, but the scribbled message is more personal, telling the reader "this is what you should think when you look at this card". It simulates, across a great separation of time and place, the experience of gazing together at the same image, and offers us data to historicise the reception of these cards in a colonial context. The signatures on many cards are illegible but the addresses are not, so the best analytic angle open to us is a 'reception study' – looking at the

cards from the perspective of the readers, consumers of the colonial spectacle and listeners to distant confessions. This focus offers us a more nuanced and complex perspective on how postcards are gendered, as they move from predominantly male senders in Indochina (71% of those in the Getty collection) to predominantly female addressees (59% of those whose addressee could be gendered).

Commentators of the period referred to postcard collecting as a 'feminine vice' (Naomi Schor 1994: 262), and women were major donors of museum collections and published announcements in exchange journals (Mathur 1999: 112). The postcard was the very example of the feminine collectible (Schor 1994: 262), but the activity of sending cards encompassed both genders and many different subject positions in colonial society, from simple soldiers and housewives to elite commanders and ladies of leisure. Opening family albums which display the images but conceal the messages provides the scholar with the transgressive thrill of lifting them out of their plastic slots and indulging in the guilty pleasure of reading someone else's mail.

The colonial postcard, which had its heyday in the first two decades of the 20th century, came to represent both the technological triumphs of western photography (printing and mass production) and the political triumphs of European conquest and expansion. Postcards were the public emblem of colonial travel, and the preferred form of correspondence for overseas residents of all classes. Printed both as part of imperial propaganda efforts (MacKenzie 1984) and church-based missionary societies (Mathur 1966), their main use was in personal communication. Their messages provide us with a diaristic form of note-jotting, reflecting on the daily grind, the experiences of feeling lost or disoriented, and – most interestingly – the projection of inner feelings onto exotic others, the use of visual images as foil for comments both sardonic and occasionally sincere.

The first French postcards were printed in 1873, and in French Indochina the first series of cards was published in 1900 by Francois-Henri Schneider and Raphael Moreau of Hanoi (Franchini and Ghesquiere 2001: 220). Within a year, they had published 3,000 cards

Fig 2: Tattouer au travail. Another card out of 11 sent to the same Jane as (Fig 1) repeats the theme of nudity and flirtation, by showing a scene of naked pain with the cheery greeting ("I wish you many joys! And you?") with an elaborate description on the back of how the skin is decorated (dated July 10, 1908): "They use a long piece of bamboo which becomes a very fine needle. How much they must suffer! But they are disciplined to accept it, and perhaps a quarter of those people we see do have their bodies decorated with tattoos in this fashion."

Fig 3: Types d 'Extreme Orient. Racial differences and racial stereotypes were a common theme of postcards of this era, such as this portrait of three types (races) identified as the Annamite (Vietnamese), Malabar (India) and Chinois (China), followed by the comment (dated February 26, 1906) "Ce sont les trios races qui dominent ici, et elles se valent bien!" ("These are the three races which are dominant here, and not one of them is worth more than the other!")

and soon a competition developed with Pierre Dieulefils, a retired military officer in Tonkin, who issued more than 5,000 post cards from 1902 to 1925 (Vin cent 1997). The photographer is not always known or acknowledged on the cards, but the Saigon firms of Augus Nicolier and later Salin-Vidal published many early photographs by Emile Gsell (Franchini and Ghesquiere 2001: 224). Several Chinese photographers (Ton Sing, Pun-Lun, Yu Cong) and one Vietnamese (Phan Chau Trinh, an exile nationalist) were well known, although their photographs were sometimes rejected from official colonial publications (Franchini and Ghesquiere 2001: 241)

The French community in Indochina was tiny, estimated at between 25,000 and 42,000 at its peak in 1940, which was roughly 0.2 percent of the total population. At the turn of the century, almost all French citizens in Indochina were born in France, and the vast majority expected to return there, so they tended to see themselves as exiles rather than settlers. While Indochina was far from France both spatially and conceptually, its elaborate temples and conceptually, its elaborate temples and exotic culture made it 'the pearl of the Extreme Orient' (a rival to British India's 'jewel in the crown'), and it was promoted as the most civilised, as well as the most profitable, of the colonies.

Few of the writers of the belle époque expressed a desire to spend the rest of their lives in what seemed a remote outpost of a far-flung empire. Some were bored, depressed and homesick, while others found their adventurous travels exciting, interesting and challenging. As a group, they were wealthy and had great economic power, since they controlled the most sizeable French colonial economy after Algeria's (Brocheux and Hemery 1995: 310). As individuals, however, many were poor and plagued by debt and disease, often asking relatives in Europe for financial assistance. Dysentery and malaria were endemic, and cholera was an intermittent threat to public health. Colonial nostalgia has come to cloak the region in a fog of dark romanticism, epitomized by the cliché of an opium-inspired reverie, in which naked concubines and noble savages float around on sampans [relatively flat-bottomed Chinese wooden boats], drifting across the bay of Ha Long [North Vietnam]. Postcard messages, while

they often comment sardonically on these themes, also move us away from remembered delights to everyday concerns, and show us a population not merely reflecting on a lost past but grappling with present concerns.

It is my argument that the interiority of the colonizer is often made visible through images of the colonized. Although racial stereotyping remains part of the picture, there is also a more subtle process of seeking out the mysteries of the 'natives' and using this peculiar world as a mirror to reflect upon aspects of their own lives. In 1854, Oliver Wendell Holmes described photography as the mirror with a memory, a new technology that reflected one's past to oneself. What he failed to understand was that the heyday of popular photography and postcards coincided with the heyday of empire. Holmes' mirror encompassed colonized peoples and lands, whose frozen images would provide alternative selves through which colonial residents might search for their own reflections.

Fig 4: Une horizontale Annnamite. The Pigeon French phrase "chi trouve 2ième femme pour Jean, beaucoup jolie!" ("I'll find you a pretty second wife") mimes invitations from local touts. The locker room tone of this card and several others recalls Alloulla's analysis of The Colonial Harem cards printed in North Africa (Alloulla 1989).

Fig 5: La Japanaise Oki Kon. Repulsion mixes with attraction again in this image of a Japanese courtesan baring her breast, inscribed with the local gossip: she was killed by a jealous client. The back text says: Saigon 8 November. "My old buddy boy (vieux potaux), You know the punishment that I received at the infirmary when you left Saigon, the Colonel changed that into 15 days in prison. After that I went back into the hospital for hot piss <gonorrhea> and cystitus. When I get out I will send news of our pals." The women are presented by implication as a possible source of his infection, perhaps during an unauthorized leave taken in the company of the male addressee.

The postcard writers had a variety of reactions to the images, and while we do not know very much about them as individuals, we can contexualise their comments and try to understand them for what they are – part of a process of mirroring and projection, which is uniquely suited to the world of photography. Erotic images (figs. 1,2,4 and 5) make up about a quarter of the whole, followed by scenes of daily life (3,6,7,9) and landscapes or street scenes (8). Sardonic jokes and cheery greetings inscribed in the front image are often paired with painful confessions on the back (5,8).

One couple in Hanoi, Paul and Berte Ullman, received over 70 postcards from former

Fig 6: Charette de Buffle. A postcard of rice fields from Tonkin bears this message for Eugenie: "Thank you for your sign of affection. I am glad to see you haven't forgotten me. It is useless to tell you how my life has become sweeter here, one can live like a landlord, and the climate is healthy which is very appreciated. We are getting along marvelously, my little doll as well, though she has become a real devil. At this instant she is on the veranda with her congaie playing the tamtam (annamite music). At least the time is passing and my daughter is growing up without causing me too much trouble." The message of European comfort and prosperity is directly juxtaposed to the products of native labour.

Fig 9: Les bonzes a la pagode (dated December 11, 1916). Back text: "What can we hope for if not the end of this cruel war and that God will keep us in good health! I hope that the end of all that is near, and that soon God will tell you that we should all come together to cry and pray together for those who have so courageously given their lives for the country and for God!" Christian prayers are invoked with the image of Buddhist monks, in a text showing more identification than distance.

houseguests, another couple who lived in Laos from 1904 to 1908. Mr. Ullman was an engineer and the Chief of Public Works in Hanoi. The sender is a railroad official nearing retirement who writes that he is depressed and tired. He feels homesick and believes he is cursed with bad luck (J'ai toujours le guigne qui me poursuit). He worries about his health and his finances and declares he has no taste to stay on in Indochina. His wife, on the other hand, describes life as wild and full of charm, and is enthusiastic about the beauty of the countryside, local festivals, women's hairstyles and theatrical performances. He finds the weather exhausting (énervant), while she finds it invigorating (température idéale). Their child becomes tanned and healthy from the mother's perspective, but tired and vulnerable from the father's. He sends 26 cards, all of them rather restrained and respectful, to the man who may be his employer. She sends 43 cards, filled with a large, loquacious script, to the woman she describes as her dear confidant. They seem to inhabit two very different countries – hers is utterly enchanting, while his is repugnant.

Fig 7: Enfants mois. "My dear little friend, Please hug your father and mother and tell them that next Sunday I have to go off on a hunting expedition among the gentlemen who live on the other side. Big kisses to my little Georges." Naked ethnic minority children holding cross bows are sent to a young friend or relative with news of a visit to their territory by the writer, underlining an implied contrast between the lives of children in France and Indochina.

The transition from a glorified, masculinist age of conquest (which in Indochina corresponds to the turn of the 20th century) to a tamer, more bourgeois form of settler colonialism is not only denied in French colonial postcard images, it is the motivation for their miniature format. Susan Stewart observes that "the miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination" (1993: 69). Similarly, the postcard image embodies many potentially troubling aspects of colonial life, such as racial inequality, sexuality, violence; and, at least for the writer, transforms what might otherwise be threatening and overwhelming into something small, endearing, and exotic.

Fig 8: Repas annamite. The front of this card says in misspelled English, "What a joye!" while the back describes (to a daughter studying in London) the "dirty and disgusting" foods that local people eat. This card comes from a long series sent by this man to both his son and his daughter, with a clearly gendered selection of images – cooking, theatre troops and village scenes for his daughter, military fortifications, ethnic minority warriors and soldiers for his son.

"I let myself live between fierce animals and forests", one writer tells us on the back of a card showing a Vietnamese woman in a rocking chair, adding that "here there is much wild game and wild lovemaking, and there are also rabbits." His reference to a soft, furry,

small and decidedly benign animal familiar to him from his childhood 'downsizes' the exotic menacing wildness of his surroundings, and also domesticates it, as does the picture of the native woman in his (westernised) home. A 'hot rabbit' (lapin chaud in French slang) designates an ardent lover, while one who 'leaves behind a rabbit' (poser un lapin) has jilted his beloved and gone his own way. The rabbit, which lives both in the wild and captivity and is both eaten and kept as a pet, is a crucial image of the transition from conquest to concubinage, from penetration to cohabitation. The writer identifies with the rabbit, an animal known both for its sexual assertiveness and for its cuddliness, but also one not usually associated with long-term fidelity. It miniaturizes the colonial experience into one of comforting familiarity, but reminds the reader of the fact that the writer will someday leave his partner 'rabbit' (the native woman) behind to return to France.

Notes:

1. Norindr, Panivong, 1996. *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film and Literature.* Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press. Morton, Patricia, 2000. *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

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