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# Cracks in the empire: reflections of French journalists and authors on the crisis in 1930s Indochina

*Henri Copin and Tobias Rettig*

**Abstract:** The events of the early 1930s in Vietnam left an important legacy to France's literature of enquiry and protest. Writers, essayists and journalists enquired on behalf of their audiences, and in the process developed France's *littérature coloniale*. By showing an interest in the colonial 'other' and identifying discrepancies between imperial ideology and colonial reality, they formed a new body of thought. This new colonial humanism arguably changed metropolitan sensibilities towards the French civilizing mission. Nevertheless, while they are critical of colonial abuses and in favour of reforms, the authors discussed in this paper do not really question the French colonial project.

**Keywords:** colonialism; colonial literature; French Indochina

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'A great novel in the rough' (André Malraux, Foreword to *Indochine S.O.S.*)

The events of the late 1920s and, in particular, of the early 1930s in French Indochina left a tragic mark on the *littérature coloniale* [colonial literature], a subgenre of French literature. Whereas the older *littérature coloniale* was typically written by someone with years of experience living somewhere in France's vast empire, a new colonial literature only emerged in the 1920s, and was frequently not written by

old colonial hands. It was a literature of inquiry and protest, and its key authors were often short-term visitors to French colonies who communicated their investigations and analysis by means of essays, reports, surveys and even novels. Early examples relating to French Indochina are Roland Dorgelès's *Sur la route mandarine* (1925), which touches on the evolution of the colony, journalist and art critic Léon Werth's beautifully observed *Cochinchine* (1926), and especially Luc Durtain's *Dieux blancs, hommes jaunes* (1930), which uncovered conflicting aspects of East–West relations. These writings were part of a wider trend in French colonial literature, such as André Gide's *Voyage au Congo* (1927) and *Retour du Tchad* (1928).<sup>1</sup>

Many of these publications are texts of denunciation, in keeping with a tradition of vigilance and commitment among writers. They raise ever-deeper questions about the discrepancy between the ideals of colonial ideology and the actual reality encountered on the ground in Africa or Asia. Within a few years, these authors moulded a new body of colonial literature, often termed *humanisme colonial* [colonial humanism], which is characterized by an emphasis on human beings, the colonial 'other', rather than on imperial ideology.<sup>2</sup>

This change did not go entirely unnoticed by a wider public because France's colonial literature was reaching a new audience: the readers of leading popular newspapers who were avidly following 'travel stories', often written by the papers' own *grands reporters* (foreign correspondents, special envoys). In 1931, Roland Lebel notes in his *Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France* that,

'From a purely literary point of view, it is noteworthy that the relating of travel stories, which is called *grand reportage* (but a disinterested reportage) has risen to the rank of the noblest kind. It is capable of enriching the old metropolitan treasure trove, not so much with new

<sup>1</sup> Roland Dorgelès (1925), *Sur la route mandarine* [*On the Mandarin Road*], Albin Michel, Paris; Léon Werth (1926), *Cochinchine*, Rieder et Cie, Paris; Luc Durtain (1930), *Dieux blancs, hommes jaunes* [*White Gods, Yellow Men*], Flammarion, Paris; André Gide (1927), *Voyage au Congo* [*Travels in the Congo*], Gallimard, Paris; André Gide (1928), *Retour du Tchad* [*Back from Chad*], Gallimard, Paris. Articles of the young Malraux, writing at about the same time, in *L'Indochine* and then in *L'Indochine enchaînée* also come to mind.

<sup>2</sup> This is well illustrated by Robert Delavignette (1931), *Les paysans noirs* [*The Black Peasants*], Stock, Paris, and his (1935) *Soudan-Paris-Bourgogne*, Grasset, Paris. See also Raoul Girardet (1972), *L'Idée coloniale en France, de 1871 à 1962* [*The Colonial Idea in France from 1871 to 1962*], La Table ronde, Paris, p 266.

images as with new ideas, not so much with sentimental analysis as with humanitarian documents.’<sup>3</sup>

What he calls a ‘true colonial realism’ is due to ‘contemporary investigators, who tear apart the former exotic view and seek to understand the colony, free of its oriental mirage, in its living reality, daily effort, and modern soul’.<sup>4</sup>

Five of the six main books discussed in this article are part of the new colonial literature and arguably also of a colonial humanism.<sup>5</sup> Instead of looking at just one of these authors (for instance, Andrée Viollis has proved to be popular in recent years among academics writing in English),<sup>6</sup> several authors and texts will be examined here. While one can mine these texts for historical information, this paper is interested in discussing them as literary texts that give us insights into French mentalities with regard to colonialism. Published between 1930 and 1935, the books discussed cover the years immediately preceding the Vietnamese Revolutionary High Tide, including the appalling labour conditions on the plantations and the assassination of labour recruiter Bazin in 1929. Some discuss its beginning, notably the Yen Bay mutiny of February 1930, while others also cover the Nghe Tinh Soviets. The historical context of the publication of these books is significant. Five of the six appeared during 1930–32, the period when the imperial idea culminated in the Colonial Exhibition of 1931 in Paris.

We argue that the books discussed suggest that, at the height of French celebrations of colonialism, cracks have appeared in France’s empire. Moreover, although the colonial idea remains unquestioned, the engagement of *littérature coloniale* with the dark side of colonialism captures and sets in motion a mutation of French mentalities. Investigating this, we suggest, is as important as investigating Vietnamese attitudes expressed in French or Vietnamese during the same time period, because colonialism tends to be characterized, at the least, by a two-way

<sup>3</sup> Roland Lebel (1931), *Histoire de la littérature coloniale en France* [History of Colonial Literature in France], Larose, Paris, p 84.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p 164.

<sup>5</sup> A sixth book will be looked at for contrasting purposes.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Nicola Cooper (2006), ‘French colonial humanism in the 1930s: the case of Andrée Viollis’, *French Cultural Studies*, Vol 17, No 2, pp 189–205. Also see Mary Lynn Stewart (2007), ‘A Frenchwoman writes about Indochina, 1931–1949: Andrée Viollis and anti-colonialism’, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, Vol 18, No 2, pp 81–102, which takes issue with an earlier account of Viollis by Nicola Cooper (2001), *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters*, Berg, Oxford.

relationship. This dialectical relationship between metropolitan centre and colony was clearly captured in 1925 by Lyautey, two years before he became the key organizer of the Colonial Exhibition: he predicted that the fate of the colonies was to secede from the motherland because the latter instilled an ideal of freedom in them.

We begin by comparing two approaches that are diametrically opposed: Paul Monet's *Les jauniers, histoire vraie* and the novelistic adaptation by Yvonne Schultz, and we contrast them with Pierre Taittinger's *Rêve rouge*.

### **Paul Monet's *Les jauniers, histoire vraie*; Yvonne Schultz's *Dans la griffe des jauniers*; Pierre Taittinger's *Rêve rouge***

#### *Paul Monet*

Paul Monet, a former official of the Indochina Geographic Department [*Service géographique de l'Indochine*] and sincere promoter of French–Annamite understanding, would have been eminently qualified to write according to the precepts of the old colonial literature.<sup>7</sup> Yet his *Les jauniers, histoire vraie* (1930) is not in the mould of the old genre.<sup>8</sup> Instead, and drawing on supporting documents, he denounces what he considers as a veritable yellow slave trade in an Indochina that has entered the capitalist era of industrial and financial organization. The creation of new enterprises and the development of rubber plantations results in increased needs for labour. The farmers of the Tonkin Delta, ruined by bad weather conditions, are to be employed as coolies for land clearing. Deportations and inhumane practices are the consequence. Monet paints the nightmarish picture of 'the mid-twentieth century return of slave markets'.<sup>9</sup>

Going beyond pure indignation, he argues that the exploitation of coolies is due to financiers controlling the whole system from afar, leading to the setting up of enormous plantations, the mistreatment of the labour force and a lack of humanitarian or simply social concern. The public

<sup>7</sup> Founder (in 1903) of the Hanoi Annamite Students Center [*Foyer des étudiants annamites de Hanoi*] and later of the Franco–Annamite Institute of Toulon [*Institut franco-annamite de Toulon*], Monet also translated Vietnamese authors such as Tran Trong Kim. We will use the term 'Annamite' for 'Vietnamese' because it was the term used in the publications discussed in this article.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Monet (1930), *Les jauniers, histoire vraie*, [*The Jauniers, a True Story*] Gallimard, Paris. 'Jauniers' ['jaune' means 'yellow'] is derived from 'Négrier', the French term for a slave-trader in the Atlantic slave trade.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p 63.

authorities have been led astray, whereas financiers now control the judicial system. The colonial government's leaders are clearly responsible for this state of affairs. Monet's arguments, precise and methodical, show that the abuses, far from isolated events, are part of a new system.

Monet's solution, in line with colonial humanism, is that the principles underpinning French colonialism, those of educator and guardian, should be restored. For him, advocacy in favour of a mistreated population is pragmatic, for the world of finance must be convinced with the language it understands – in other words, one will get more from a workforce treated with justice. Moreover, the political situation in India and China presents a risk of contagion. Monet concludes that, while everything in his culture keeps the Annamite away from 'communism and Sovietization, bad shepherds are happy to promote theories dangerous to the established order'.<sup>10</sup> There is a disturbing trend in the Far East.

News of the Yen Bay mutiny in early February 1930, when members of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party [Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dan, or VNQDD] launched an uprising with soldiers of the Yen Bay garrison, spreads gloom over the issue. Although not anticolonialist, Monet, lucid and informed, perceived the antagonism between the proclaimed ideals of humanist education and emancipation and the law of finance, but he trusted that the conflict between morality and action would disappear by reviving ideals and order. Therefore, he stands for a particular moment of representation of the colonial ideology. Stripped of any trace of exoticism, the reality evoked here is economic, social and political. However, his analysis is based on the reservoir of republican, humanitarian and nationalist ideals that were also at the core of the colonialist doctrine of the French statesman Jules Ferry. In terms of form, Monet's *Jaunières* is an essay based on classical rhetoric, excluding neither emotion nor irony, and relying on solid documentation, akin to an investigation to uncover reality and to act on it. From this perspective, Monet meets the new expectations of colonial literature, which aims at reflecting the economic and social reality of the world.

In fact, Monet's denunciation was not the first one. In 1925, Roland Dorgelès had already noted the conflict between capitalist exploitation and the proclaimed ideals of colonial justice and development. In a chapter of *Sur la route mandarine* entitled 'Under the sign of the piastre',<sup>11</sup> he describes a rubber plantation – 'ten thousand hectares, three thousand

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p 169.

<sup>11</sup> The piastre was the French currency in French Indochina.

two hundred coolies, seven hundred thousand rubber trees' – whose directors and shareholders are 'interested only in the dividends, the rest not being of any concern to them'.<sup>12</sup> In 1930, the same year as Monet's book, Luc Durtain published *Dieux blancs, hommes jaunes*,<sup>13</sup> a travel narrative and at the same time a diary and investigation, which stands out for its amount of information and the nature of its reflections on the clash between Europe and Asia. In a chapter entitled 'Rubber', Durtain testifies on the excesses of labour recruitment. He also denounces 'contracts for three years of slavery, total dependency of workers on the company which employs them, mouldy rice, and quasi non-existent medical attention'.<sup>14</sup>

### *Yvonne Schultz*

Monet's denunciation of labour conditions in French Indochina was readily taken up in a novel, *Dans la griffe des Jauniers*.<sup>15</sup> Its author, Yvonne Schultz, relies on Monet's investigation to create a dramatic novel: the characters suffer rape, abuse, injustice, treachery and disease. The double change of perspective is noteworthy. Unlike in the original, it is no longer a prominent individual who complains by putting forward an argument based on figures that refers back to an ideal. Instead, outrage gives way to emotion, the eruption of the human and the experience of injustice and oppression. From a literary point of view, moreover, it is the view of the native and the victim that prevails, 'the Tonkinese farmer, accustomed since childhood to the Delta, a countryside akin to an immense matting of straw, with ponds and a few sprays of trees, here and there'.<sup>16</sup> Several pages recount the rubber tapper's day or show scenes reflecting the caustic humour of Annamite farmers. Other pages show the perspective of the planter, with his problems of land clearing, investment and economic crisis. Schultz's moral position is unambiguous:

'It all boils down to this: do not spend a thousand piastres per year to save five hundred coolies. Gentlemen, it is shameful, for ten to twenty thousand francs, to condemn a flock of men to suffering. Believe me;

<sup>12</sup> Dorgelès, *supra* note 1, at p 205.

<sup>13</sup> Durtain, *supra* note 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 200–204.

<sup>15</sup> Yvonne Schultz (1931), *Dans la griffe des Jauniers* [*In the Jauniers' Clutches*], Plon, Paris.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p 51.

the performance of happy workers is higher than that of a horde of slaves.<sup>17</sup>

A scene that refers to the actual assassination in Hanoi in early 1929 of the head labour recruiter Bazin shows how injustice can lead to an eruption of violence. It is an elliptical scene, heavy in consequences:

‘The letter was sent. Emile Nguyen received it. He went to the city and, without explanation, killed a European recruiter.

Then he committed suicide.

Now the white men could hear the bullet that killed Mr. X ... whistling in their ears. Those Europeans who were righteous, honest, and merciful could also feel the coldness of the machete, threatening their guts. [...] Action was needed. There was protest about the intellectual culture that “perverted” the Annamites. Evil heeled elsewhere.’<sup>18</sup>

Thus, Yvonne Schultz’s novel demonstrates that the outcry of Monet was not in vain and illustrates the evolution of colonial literature towards the side of the victims, connected to the reality of social facts. Economic and political crisis hence could become the subject of a novel and enter the field of colonial literature.<sup>19</sup>

### *Pierre Taittinger: the antithesis*

It is interesting to contrast Monet and Schultz, and indeed the other texts discussed in this paper, with an author who did not write in the mould of the new colonial literature and who emphasized imperial domination rather than colonial humanism. Inspired by the Yen Bay mutiny of February 1930, Pierre Taittinger penned his *Rêve Rouge*, published later that year.<sup>20</sup> A wealthy champagne magnate, conservative Member of Parliament, and Chairman of the Committee for Algeria, the Colonies and the Protectorates, Taittinger had little consideration for the colonial ‘other’ or an analysis of labour conditions in French Indochina. Instead, he exposed a prejudiced thesis, developed and commented upon with such a wealth of details and arguments that it appears to verge on obsession. His Foreword captures his standpoint:

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p 212.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p 219.

<sup>19</sup> In 1932, Yvonne Schultz published *Le sampanier de la baie d’Along* [*The Boatman of Halong Bay*], Plon, Paris, a novel about the daily life of fishermen in Halong Bay.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Taittinger (1930), *Rêve Rouge* [*Red Dream*], Les Editions du National, Paris, illustrations by Pem.



‘For the first French victims of the Red Dream [...] to the officers, warrant officers and soldiers massacred at Yen Bay [...] horribly murdered by the criminal accomplices of Russian Bolshevism.’<sup>21</sup>

An illustration by the famous cartoonist Pem reinforces Taittinger’s starting point: a black-hooded skeleton emerges in Asia. Armed with a scythe, it threatens and stares menacingly at a frail young girl standing on a tiny Europe: it is *Communist Propaganda* against *Civilization*. Elsewhere, one can see a Gallic warrior who successfully confronts three redoubtable figures: a ghost, a *moujik* [muzhik, a Russian peasant] and a Chinese mandarin with treacherous eyes. The theme is the threat of the Bolshevik dream of universal domination.

Taittinger deserves some credit for his attempt to place the question of Indochina in a broader historical and strategic perspective. Nevertheless, his systematic bias defeats his effort because it ignores the reality on the ground that was so well captured by Monet. A single paragraph refers to the plight of the Tonkinese farmers, whereas the question of the workforce, which so troubled Monet and later also Schultz, is not addressed at all. There is nothing about the excesses and injustice that the *Bolsheviks*, a term applied to all of the protesters, can exploit. Taittinger’s argument is undermined: why are the people following the foreign conspirators?

Instead, for Taittinger, it is the ideas of emancipation disseminated by a colonial France, its ideals of progress, education and justice, which throw Annamite society into confusion. On this last point, he concurs with others who noted the apparent paradox that French education and emancipation would logically lead to calls for ending French rule. Dorgelès had pointed this out in his *Sur la route mandarine*, and Albert Sarraut, former Governor General of French Indochina and later Minister of Colonies recalls it in *Grandeur et servitude coloniales* – the role of colonial action is to render it unnecessary. In all cases, it disrupts social structures and creates new elites deprived of fair opportunities.<sup>22</sup>

However, the obsession of the Bolshevik conspiracy blinds Taittinger, who plays on fear of the ‘other’, the Barbarian, whom he pictures with

<sup>21</sup> We should note that the Yen Bay mutiny was instigated by nationalists rather than communists, although there were some overlaps and the differences were not fully evident at the time of writing.

<sup>22</sup> Albert Sarraut (1931), *Grandeur et servitude coloniales* [*Colonial Splendour and Servitude*], Editions du galittaire, Paris.

‘slanted, heinous and worrying eyes [...] this mysterious and distant yellow peril (even more dangerous in proportion to) the cowardice of this race’.<sup>23</sup> He thus addresses real problems, such as the unsettling of society, dislocation of the mandarin system, discontentment of scholars, cultural trauma of European education, not to mention facing the equally real danger of revolutionary agitation supported by the Chinese. Despite the evidence that he cites, he sees only one cause: a conspiracy against the West. As a result, he provides only one type of solution: authority, firm action, repression, and the ultimate weapon, manual labour...

Thus, in the light of the same events, Monet’s and Taittinger’s views are conflicting. The former emphasizes economic injustice and even exploitation caused by French financiers’ ambitions, with their impact on an unfairly treated workforce, with reforms as the preferred solution. Taittinger, in contrast, conjures up a conspiracy hatched by the descendants of the Huns against a France whose gentleness and sense of justice turn it into a willing victim, and thus revives early twentieth century fears of a Yellow Peril.

The divergence of views is such that these books do not seem to recognize the same reality. Yet other observers are interested too – the journalists. What do they say? It is interesting and instructive to compare two books – Louis Roubaud’s *Viêt Nam, la tragédie indochinoise* (1931) and Andrée Viollis’s *Indochine S.O.S.* (1935) – and above all two different and complementary approaches.

***Grands reporters: Louis Roubaud, Viêt Nam, la tragédie indochinoise* (1931); Andrée Viollis, *Indochine S.O.S.* (1935)**

*Louis Roubaud*

‘Viêt Nam! Viêt Nam! Viêt Nam! Homeland of the South! Thirteen times, I heard the outcry in front of the guillotine of Yen Bay. Thirteen men sentenced to death shouted it, one by one, two metres away from climbing the scaffold.’

This epigraph opens the book which Louis Roubaud published in 1931

<sup>23</sup> Taittinger, *supra* note 20, at pp 244, 179 and many others.

under the title of *Viêt Nam, la tragédie indochinoise*.<sup>24</sup> It is again the nationalist-led uprising of the garrison in upper Tonkin that lies at the heart of the investigation, with the following events, in Indochina, and also in May 1930 on the occasion of the opening of the *Maison de l'Indochine* (a boarding house for students from Indochina) at the Cité Universitaire in Paris. The boycott of the ceremony by the Indochinese students was in a gesture of solidarity with the prisoners of Yen Bay. How could these young people, 'the rising elite, which we are educating at home' have been in solidarity with murderers? It is to understand these events that the special correspondent of the conservative *Le Petit Parisien*, France's leading and most widely distributed newspaper, investigates on-site. During his stay in Indochina, other incidents break out, columns of peasants form, march on the quarter of the French *Résident* of a province to claim a tax rebate, and confront the militia guard.

Louis Roubaud claims that these events are directed by one single organization. The previously competing secret societies have merged into a revolutionary party, the *Viet Nam Cong San Dang* [Vietnamese Communist Party], which is connected to Moscow via Canton. Nevertheless, as elsewhere in Asia, communism must 'disguise its face'. Are they communists or nationalists? Indeed, the word 'communism' has a different meaning for the leaders and foot soldiers of the revolutionary army. To understand this, one must wonder to what popular sentiment this word is addressed, and what it means for the people. Having explained his method, the journalist can then formulate the object of his investigation precisely:

- 1° – The temperamental incompatibility, which is increasing from year to year among white men and yellow men of this country;
- 2° – The clever exploitation of this dissent by the Communists of the Third International.'<sup>25</sup>

Roubaud's book provides a nuanced conclusion. For him, a misunder-

<sup>24</sup> Louis Roubaud (1931), *Viêt Nam, la tragédie indochinoise* [*Viet Nam: An Indochinese Tragedy*], Librairie Valois, Enquêtes, Paris. 'His moderation, apparent neutrality, credibility and his distance from controversy set him clearly apart from his competitors. [...] The investigations and the reporting of the newspaper were quite often outstanding in terms of quality and credibility; they can be usefully consulted, even to this day.' *Histoire générale de la presse française* [*General History of the French Press*] T. III, 1871–1940, P.U.F., Paris, 1972, p 512.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p 16.

standing opposes natives eager to access a promised freedom to a few stubborn French who confuse the wealth of France with their own. Neither repression nor capitulation in front of violence will dissipate this misunderstanding. As soon as the dust settles, one must apply the measures provided 20 years ago to educate the native citizen in the context of the *cit  indig ne* [native polity], which is within the socio-political setting of the indigenous polity rather than the frameworks fixed by the colonial economy or imperial laws.

The author, neither judge nor arbiter, demonstrates in this remarkable investigation a concept of journalism based on two imperatives: to see and to understand, and then to allow the reader to see and to understand. Hence he does not merely ‘report’, but also analyses by unravelling the motives of different actors, by trying to understand the meaning behind the anecdote, and by aggregating seemingly disparate events so that they illuminate each other. He knows that he can be misled by certain situations. He investigates in all circles and contemplates the Indochinese situation from economic, social, psychological, political and historical angles. Roubaud thus clearly sees the role of a nationalist Communist Party and the hands of Nguyen Ai Quoc (the future Ho Chi Minh). However, unlike Taittinger, he regards the explanation of ‘the hand of Moscow and Canton’ as insufficient. Roubaud’s basic question is about why the revolutionaries succeed in recruiting troops from among proletarians as well as among intellectuals. This he seeks to understand and sometimes he simply takes note of the situation: it is then up to the reader to judge, or to hesitate.

Let us take, as an example, the statement closing the chapter on forced labour:

‘Tens of thousands of poor men were deprived of their freedom, through persuasion, deception or trickery.

The officer of this large market was Mr. Bazin, Director of the *Office de recrutement de la main d’ uvre indig ne* [Bureau of Indigenous Labour Recruitment].

On February 9 last year [1929], about 8 o’clock, Mr. Bazin left a house situated at 110, Hu  Road. He had just crossed the street to get to his car. A man, hidden behind the car, suddenly appears. A flash of light ... the sound of a gunshot. Mr Bazin, hit in the face, falls. Two more shots finish him.’<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p 185.

The concern of the investigator for accuracy and precision is constant. However, understanding can also be misleading. Reality is complex, bustling, surprising and contradictory. That is why Roubaud's investigation abounds with observations of daily life, sensory experiences such as the notes of scents and the insignificant but telling detail:

'At the dock where the boat was moored, there was a dense crowd despite the early hour: the barber shaving a customer sitting on a stool, food hawkers with their table and kitchen on their shoulder, sellers of paper money for funerals, each singing a tune identifying them with their respective corporation.'<sup>27</sup>

In Nam Dinh, industrial city and capital of an agricultural province in Tonkin's Red River Delta, after two years of disasters – the July 1929 typhoon and the January 1930 frost – he meets the 'bony face of misery':

'I went from village to village ... It is always busy, even though money is scarce. Yesterday, among baskets of sweet violets, white tomatoes, wax corn, next to a man trying to attract the attention of a buyer for a live skinny black pig tied up like a sausage, and next to a barber shaving a client seated on a basket in the open air, a young girl, standing motionless, holding her child on her hip [...] The interpreter explained:

- She wants to sell the *nho* to you.
- Why?
- For five piastres.'<sup>28</sup>

It may also happen that simple reality opens doors to unlikely encounters with the country's revolutionary past. Hence at dusk, on the Perfume River in Hue, a sampan appears, with the boatmen singing:

'Where is my girlfriend? Is the moon shining on her too? Is she still touched by the fragrance of flowers?''<sup>29</sup>

An old man dressed in a black silk tunic gets off the boat, prostrates himself before the journalist and mutters 'I dare to greet Your Excellency'.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p 80.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p 192. *Nho*: a young child.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p 229.

He is none other than the retired revolutionary Phan Boi Chau, previously sentenced to death but eventually amnestied and placed under house arrest. The interpreter explains a little later the veteran revolutionary's apparent confusion during his discussion with the reporter: 'He was as embarrassed as a nun who gives birth'.

Finally, another scene: in his office, the French police commissioner, who speaks the local language 'better than a native', is making conversation 'in a familiar, sometimes amused tone, if I judge by the laughter', with a 22-year-old man:

'[The latter] has the face of a squirrel, his eyes sparkle. He is standing up, and when he gets agitated, he seems to forget his situation as a captive. The chain holding his wrists crossed over the other allows only a simple gesture, always the same: raising both arms towards the ceiling fan.

[He] is laughing heartily, his shoulders are shaking, and he seems to ease off long, monotonous hours in a cell, in the conversation of an intelligent man.'<sup>30</sup>

Yet the man in chains is counting the days he has left to live. His head had a price on it because he directed the party's police and assassins. In some way, he is the equivalent of the man with whom he jokes and who has just arrested him ... It is a situation of complicity between implacable opponents, and in which the relative importance of individual life is subtly suggested and hinted at.

Written in a sober tone, here is the telegram message describing the execution of the mutineers of Yen Bay in the early morning hours of 17 June 1930. Roubaud suggests the atmosphere of that tragic night:

'It was one of these Tonkin summer nights so hot that it would make you ask for mercy, filled with moisture, perfumed or foul – it was not certain any more – with the rotting vegetation. [...] After an hour or two, the men returned, but the indigenous infantry could hardly be heard with its eight hundred bare feet beating the grass. The garrison of Yen Bay formed a square, outlining the meadow.'<sup>31</sup>

This perhaps explains the audience of Roubaud, international correspon-

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p 117.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p 155.

dent for the great popular conservative newspaper. His palette combines concrete notes, information delivered without doctoring, the revealing anecdote, and facts experienced at first hand. His observation, which testifies to his keen eye and a rare ability to listen, is completed by an elaborate and critical reflection that knows how to put things in perspective. Thus, with his interest in the new social groups that he discovers and his respect for their difference, Roubaud avoids demagoguery and contributes to the creation of an aesthetic of true facts, of what has been seen, of fragments of information, of unfettered news: a genre in which the reporter's angle of vision mingles with the creation of the novelist.

### *Andrée Viollis*

It is to the 'beautiful and robust investigation' of Roubaud that Andrée Viollis, also a *grand reporter* of the *Petit Parisien*, owes the interest tinted with emotion that she brings to what is happening in Indochina. She was one of the group of journalists that followed the investigative trip to Indochina of Paul Reynaud, the Minister of Colonies, in late 1931. Her book, *Indochine S.O.S.*,<sup>32</sup> is dated 1935, although part of her report was published in the *Petit Parisien* and also in the journal *Esprit* in 1933. Viollis explains in the Foreword that the notes and documents she brought back were such damning evidence against colonial repression in French Indochina and the colonial legal system that she initially chose, 'in spite of me', to postpone the publication.

Subsequently, outraged by the injustice of trials in which perpetrators of crimes against the population were acquitted and by the absence of serious reforms, she resolves to publish them: a rare example of self-censorship publicly confessed! However, she emphasizes scrupulously the limits of her investigation as a survey of the cause of the disorders and their suppression. She does not attempt to project a complete picture of Indochina or to challenge colonization. To the charge of being anti-French she objects strongly, opposes her hesitation, her doubts and, above all, the desire to serve the truth. How? By issuing an 'unfettered testimony', essentially a transcription of her notebook, completed with a few essential details. The reader can then walk alongside her.

Beyond denunciation of torture, denial of justice or serious deficiencies

<sup>32</sup> Andrée Viollis (1935), *Indochine S.O.S.*, Gallimard, Paris (foreword by André Malraux).

with the food supply or with the medical support system, Andrée Viollis's book bears witness to a constant deception. Every day she observes the divorce between the aspirations of Annamite circles and the mistrust, misunderstanding or open disdain of some settlers and the French authorities. Under her pen, the liberal mandarin joins the constitutionalist or the nationalist students demanding basic freedoms, and finds an intolerable gap between a liberating rhetoric and the petty or brutal reality of his daily life.

However, either these claims are ignored – we do not want to hear it – or they are disqualified: if they call for it, it is because they are communists. Anyway, they do not have the maturity required for freedom, etc. The blindness of the French authorities is permanent: the inexperienced administrator is isolated from the population. The magistrate, not knowing the language, has to rely on a local assistant. A police official who is sympathetic to the natives blames the unrest in Annam on 'the total incompetence of the civil service personnel'.<sup>33</sup> Finally, France protects a discredited neo-mandarin system and earns the hatred of the people.

Viollis lives this disappointment during every moment. Her trust in the Minister of Colonies gradually disappears. The eye of the Minister himself becomes less accurate after each visit or ceremony, his plans for reforms are slowly dissolving, his speeches increasingly prudent, and his hands more and more tied. The meetings of the journalist are monitored, her conversations suspected, her informants harassed or even arrested. There is intimidation, and the authorities are warned against her. It is as if everything is manipulated, by order, blindness or interest, to prevent her from being informed. It also happens that Andrée Viollis is sometimes naïve and unworldly. Despite her precautions, she sometimes falls into black and white views, which are the price of her generosity. Nevertheless, she cannot be accused of systematic bias. She is there to be informed and she refuses to enter into a debate on the legitimacy of the colonial enterprise, or even on its benefits, which she does not deny. 'To raise and resolve such problems, I would have needed more authority and more time.'

But how can we blame her for testifying first for the beggars, the crippled and the starving? Like Monet and Roubaud, she cannot accept injustice committed in the name of France. Far more than her male counterparts, she shows her emotions and her reactions of surprise or

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p 128.



indignation. Let us follow her on her visit to the *Maison Centrale*, Saigon's notorious prison:

'These boys so young, this dialogue half-distressed, half-playful, I do not understand anything [...] I cannot restrain a gesture? [...] [...] My heart beats: I feel ashamed, and hurt. [...] I will never forget the sudden rush of a hunted animal, the faces of hatred and terror.'<sup>34</sup>

Already in the Foreword she had warned, 'The reader will follow the path that I followed'. Thus, the reader is led to identify with the investigator who shares her emotions. This involvement of the reader, converted into a direct witness and invited to respond with his or her own emotions, is one of the strengths of the book. Moreover, this direct and engaged gaze gives unity to these notes released in the chronological order of the trip, an arbitrary order in the sense that it juxtaposes very different events, which take direction and strength from their convergence, as in a montage.

Viollis's conclusion provides an example of such a montage. It presents, on the same page, a warning from the Police official, then a telegram from a Shanghai newspaper about the Joan of Arc celebration in Saigon, including a parade of Annamite schoolchildren, official events, and finally the satisfied conclusions of the brilliant *chargé de mission* returning from Indochina. There is no commentary underlining these fragments of reality. The manner in which they are laid out represents the juxtaposition of viewpoints that tragically ignore each other. Therefore, the other strength of the book is in its disorder, which is that of reality itself.

In contrast to Viollis, Roubaud had tried to organize his information to make it intelligible. As a journalist, he delivered the results of an investigation and then constructed an interpretation based on reflection. Unlike Roubaud, Viollis immerses her reader in the heart of the investigation. It is not only the reader's emotion that is sought, but also his or her astonishment, thoughts, and critical ability in the face of a disturbing reality. This rapid perception of rough information is modern in that it reflects the complexity of the contemporary world. At the same time, it emphasizes the singularity of a distant world, and thus renews the writing of the exotic. Yet reality is no longer constructed by a central and omniscient ego. Instead, an exploded reality asserts itself.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p 9.

*André Malraux and Pierre Herbart on Viollis*

In his brief and incisive Foreword to *Indochine S.O.S.*, André Malraux highlights the literary modernity of reporting, and argues that it ‘prepares a new form of novel’.<sup>35</sup> Instead of pursuing the creation of an imaginary world, reporting draws its force from the ‘possession of the reality through intellect and sensitivity’ and brings it to the level of an art ‘through the elliptical reconciliation, not of two words but of two facts’. For this new journalism is no longer a matter of inventing characters, but of finding facts. Think about a scene such as the one at Saigon’s *Maison Centrale*, in which the prison director calls the young Annamite death row candidate ‘dirty little boy’ and at the same time pats his cheek. Malraux spoke of a ‘great novel in the rough’, in which each trait makes sense through the people in it. Since any new art form involves a will, the organizing principle of this material is a lucidity that consists of reporting and protest: art is action.

Malraux’s literary intuition was commendable. He had engaged with Annamite intellectuals such as the novelist Nguyen Phan Long, the agronomist and constitutionalist Bui Quang Chieu, and the journalist–activist Nguyen An Ninh in the adventure of the newspapers *Indochine* and then *l’Indochine enchaînée*.<sup>36</sup> As for the use of rough material in the context of the novel, Malraux’s opening lines of his *Conquérants* (1928), and especially the later *L’Espoir* (1937), provide powerful illustrations, as these novels integrate telephone call transcripts, telegrams and even newspaper fragments.

From a literary standpoint, Viollis’s reporting thus forms part of a larger body of work including Apollinaire’s poem *Zone* and Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), as well as unanimism, cubism and collage, in which the perspective of the reporter or the ‘*école du regard*’ of the author builds an aesthetic of the fragment, of the juxtaposition, and constructs a rough reality that is edited like a documentary film.

<sup>35</sup> Andrée Viollis probably took her title from an article by André Malraux published on 11 October 1933 in the French weekly *Marianne* (published by Gaston Gallimard, with Malraux as an editor) under the title *S.O.S.*; Pierre Herbart (1958) gives another version in *La ligne de force* [*The Line of Force*], Gallimard, Folio, Paris, p. 38. He may have said, ‘Dear Viollis, your book should be only a small alarm bell. Horrible and strident, but just.’ She may have followed his advice.

<sup>36</sup> See Jean Lacouture (1973), *Malraux, une vie dans le siècle* [*Malraux: A Life in the Century*], Seuil, Points-Histoire, Paris, as well as Clara Malraux’s (1966) memoirs, *Nos vingt ans* [*Our Twenties*], Grasset, Paris, and (1969) *Les combats et les jeux* [*The Battles and the Games*], Grasset, Paris, which cover the years 1922–24 and 1924–27 respectively.

Pierre Herbart's *La ligne de force* brings an additional perspective to Viollis's story and the tour of the Minister of Colonies.<sup>37</sup> A travel companion of Viollis in Indochina and China, this journalist published a collection of memoirs in 1958 in which he introduced, in a casual tone, an unexpected and somewhat fantastic vision of his adventures as an 'uncontrollable anti-colonialist'. Therefore, he is totally biased. He categorically refuses to tell or describe the reality of Indochina, and differs in this from 'dear Viollis':

'I will dedicate to you an eternal souvenir. You were kind, charming, ridiculous, with your muslin dresses in the rice fields. Better than anyone – I still find it difficult to believe it – your reporting was objective, clever, and terrible.'<sup>38</sup>

However, the reality of the crisis of early 1930s Indochina, mentioned briefly, exceeds his most pessimistic expectations:

'Where Mr Paul Reynaud, only six weeks ago, found happy people, fanatically devoted to their ancestors the Gauls; where all was order and beauty for him, we were forced, poor Viollis and I, to move a corpse every hundred yards along the road or to crush it under our wheels. If it had been only dead people! We had to cope with living corpses, imploring with distended bellies.'<sup>39</sup>

Appearing some 30 years after the publication of the other books discussed above, Herbart's memoirs stand out in terms of their bias. Four years after the defeat at Dien Bien Phu spelled the beginning of the end of French imperialism, Herbart no longer worked under the pressure of the news, and had the benefit of hindsight. This allowed for a more detached, radical view than that of his former counterparts:

'One evening, I realized that it was over. I knew exactly which sort of book Andrée Viollis would write. This famous reality, cooked and reheated over the flame of my opium lamp, we had to confront it. Remember, my friend; an oppressed population starts by claiming justice. At first it does not get it, then it introverts, and in its pained soul ferments a slow revolt which suddenly explodes, having found

<sup>37</sup> Herbart, *supra* note 35.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p 12.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p 42.

its dream: what this people now wants is equality. At this stage, they generally receive bullets, and while bleeding return to their burrows to lick their wounds. The stench of the dead rallies the living to rise for a final assault. They want freedom now. This dubious battle they win, that is, they reject their foreign masters, choose in their own ranks other masters – and change to another system of slavery. But this concerns us no more.<sup>40</sup>

### *Jean Dorsenne*

The Minister's tour, finally, triggered the publication of another book, *Faudra-t-il évacuer l'Indochine?*<sup>41</sup> Its author, the journalist and novelist Jean Dorsenne, begins by explaining the title, which raises, he says, a question that may be 'irrelevant and in bad taste'. More than one year after the Nghe Tinh Soviets have petered out, Dorsenne stresses that the situation in Indochina is satisfactory: political calm has returned and the tone of the Minister is optimistic. In short, the overall perception that remains is one of an economic crisis, as elsewhere in the world. Yet, in Dorsenne's view, this lack of concern is dangerous because the repeated warnings of writers such as Dorgelès or Werth might be forgotten.<sup>42</sup> It is worth reflecting on the future of the colony.

Dorsenne presents different perspectives. Given the results of the French approach, altered by the economic crisis, what emerges is the persistence of certain conditions: French guardianship over the natives remains, and so does the bitterness of the Annamite elite about the lack of basic freedoms at a time when other major Asian countries conquer theirs. These underlying conditions partially explain the growing influence of the communists, and Dorgelès consequently provides a detailed survey that highlights the prominent role of Nguyen Ai Quoc.

Nguyen Ai Quoc's coming to the fore of this 1932 book signals a new era. Veteran revolutionary Phan Boi Chau is described as a 'senile oldster' reduced to impotence since 1920 and replaced by various nationalist groups and secret societies that eventually unite in the Indochinese Communist Party with the support of the Soviet Union. Here Dorsenne's analysis complements that of Roubaud who investigated in Indochina at a time when even the French Sûreté was in the dark about the momentous changes in the reconfiguration of the

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 25 and 26.

<sup>41</sup> Jean Dorsenne (1932), *Faudra-t-il évacuer l'Indochine ?* [Should Indochina be Evacuated?] Nouvelle société d'édition, Paris.

<sup>42</sup> Dorgelès, *supra* note 1; Werth, *supra* note 1.

anticolonial movement. His analysis nevertheless steers clear of Taittinger's almost exclusive focus on the importance of Moscow. Interestingly, Dorsenne's analysis contrasts with the French settlers who maintain that: 'Communism does not exist in Indochina. It is a scarecrow that the administration has invented and dressed to hide its own mistakes.'<sup>43</sup>

Anticolonial activism aside, Dorsenne also analyses in detail the impact on Annamite society of education in *quoc ngu*, the romanized Vietnamese script, in the first three years of primary school, and then in French. In the traditional education system, in contrast, the child learned how to draw characters, to articulate aphorisms or the meanings they convey. This explains the important role of the literati in Annamite civilization, and the prominent role of the written and reassuring symbol of the permanence of an unchanging culture. In doing so, the pupils were impregnated with 'a morality based on filial piety, self-development, and respect for authority'. If they read nothing other than *quoc ngu*, they could no longer see 'the old philosophers' formulas expressed in characters [which ...] forced themselves upon the mind of the child who saw them displayed everywhere, in pagodas, on pieces of silk, or on wooden tablets in homes. It was a solid frame that kept the Annamite on track throughout the course of his life.'<sup>44</sup> In contrast, French education had dismantled the ancient secular morality of Confucianism and helped shape a national consciousness by exalting patriotic figures such as Joan of Arc, and explaining the rights of people to self-determination...

Dorsenne puts forward his most original contribution in a chapter entitled 'The colonial misunderstanding'. He starts rather conservatively by noting the presence of France in Indochina as an established fact. Moreover, he recognizes that the official doctrine provides legitimacy, but only if the ideal, defined by Albert Sarraut as France's civilizing mission, is acted upon. Alas, 'by the force of circumstances, an idealistic and generous France is forced to treat its colonies as interest-generating property'.<sup>45</sup> This is what the British do. But in the French colony, the misconception persists because France's altruistic principles are contradicted by her self-interested actions. Colonial officials, 'in very good faith, develop programmes comforting the hearts of the Annamites, while large firms are busy developing the regions that they have acquired'.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Dorsenne, *supra* note 41, at p 58.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p 158.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p 214.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p 254.

Therefore, concludes Dorsenne, one must renounce the prejudice of the superiority of the white race and abandon 'this evil colonial spirit, which is the cause of so much harm', and abandon 'sentimental' illusions so as to build France's relations finally on mutual interest and respect: 'The union of France with Indochina is a marriage of convenience. This is a reason for it to last ...'<sup>47</sup>

This appeal to what amounts to a policy of pragmatism based on the recognition of mutual self-interest rather than on the ideals of the civilizing mission is the first attempt to think differently about the colonial relationship. Although French colonialism is never explicitly questioned in the literature cited above, its authors' faith is nevertheless shaken. The civilizing mission and the use of large and noble sentiments now are suspected of some sort of deception. In a sense, the Colonial Exhibition begins to close its doors while the cracks in the colonial edifice remain.

## Conclusion

Some remarks before the conclusion. Everyone looks at a complex reality with his or her own eyes. In fact, it is a permanent debate: which reality is it? Who has the right to talk about it?

Authors such as Dorgelès, Durtain, Roubaud and Viollis disprove the assumptions of a Pierre Mille or a Eugène Pujarniscle and the theorists of colonial literature that only the real colonials, those implanted in a foreign society for a long time, are capable of transcending the exotic cliché to reveal a truth. Among the authors discussed here, only Paul Monet would qualify (to some extent). Yet the travel accounts and reportages of Dorgelès, Durtain, Roubaud and Viollis clearly prove that a pair of fresh eyes can see clearly, and sometimes better than some of the old established colonial hands.

The authors, with the exception of Taittinger who writes entirely from a metropolitan perspective, display an interest in the colonized 'other'. This leads to the return of ordinary men and women of the people into France's *littérature coloniale*. Characters that have disappeared from sight are rediscovered, such as the *nha qués* [peasants, in Vietnamese], coolies, *con gais* [in this context, concubines] with their *nho* [child] on the hip, captured in a bustling street market. What is different from the older colonial literature by authors such as Jean Marquet or Emile Nolly,

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p 254.

who created memorable characters such as ‘Hien le Maboul’, is the entry of a new actor: the professional revolutionary.

It is the appearance of professional revolutionaries, so important in rallying and organizing popular discontent against imperial and feudal exploitation, which signals significant cracks in the overarching ideology and the social foundations of the French empire. These cracks are visible in a growing and more structured communist movement, a frequently miserable and often unjust economic situation, a rapidly changing society whose elite calls with increasing impatience for the promised but withheld freedom, and a colonial power strangely hesitant between civilizing mission and imperial repression. With the exception of Taittinger, the authors denounce the systemic shortcomings of French rule in Indochina and refuse to accept that the benefits of colonialism counterbalance its negative aspects.

It is interesting that none of the authors calls into question French imperialism as such, and that many even emphasize that they are not denouncing the colonial system. Their position is one of colonial humanism that believes in, but does not agitate for, reform of the imperial system. There is no sign of a vision for a post-colonial humanism, even though Dorgelès had raised crucial questions in his *Sur la route mandarine* as early as 1925. Five years ahead of the Vietnamese Revolutionary High Tide of 1930–31, he had been prescient about the timing of the French loss of Indochina:

‘Will these people ever find the strength to build a nation? What is its future, moulded by us? If our Statesmen, our Governors apply a policy of force in Indochina, if they refuse to grant more rights to the indigenous, if they do nothing to increase their well-being and if they keep regarding them solely as living tools to enrich them, France, thirty years from now, will have lost its most glorious empire.’<sup>48</sup>

Yet from Monet to Dorsenne, there is a will to go further and bear witness about the discrepancy between colonial ideology and reality. With Sarraut, one affirms that ‘France cannot have two faces, one of freedom turned to the mainland, another of tyranny turned toward the colonies’.<sup>49</sup> In keeping with a tradition of vigilance and commitment among writers, they contribute to the questioning and the deepening of the

<sup>48</sup> Dorgelès, *supra* note 1, at pp 55, 207.

<sup>49</sup> Sarraut, *supra* note 22.

interrogation about colonial ideology. Does imperial ideology match colonial reality, or are there cracks and fissures in the colonial edifice? They do this by giving due consideration to the colonized, but without really questioning French colonialism as such. Their position remains limited to one of colonial humanism, but their hope that the exposure of colonial abuses will lead to tangible reforms is eventually disappointed. They arguably succeed – in particular the *grands reporters* who reach a new audience through the popular newspapers – in changing French sensibilities about the benefits of the civilizing mission. By writing about the colonized and showing them in a new daily reality, moreover, they drive home the insight that ‘to colonize is to arm the other against us’.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> According to the splendid formula of Bernard Hue in *La noce indochinoise* [*The Indochina Wedding*], introduction to Bernard Hue, ed (1992), *Indochine, reflets littéraires* [*Indochina: Literary Reflections*], Presses universitaires de Rennes, Plurial 3, Rennes, p 19.