

Sex and the Colonial City: Mapping Masculinity, Whiteness, and Desire in French Occupied Hanoi.

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Abstract

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Based on an analysis of sexually explicit cartoons from a Hanoi newspaper, this essay is a gendered reading of the colonial encounter in French Indochina. Using previously untapped sources from the pre-1954 collection in Vietnam's National Library, I engage critical theories of masculinity and whiteness to create a thick description of life in the colonial city. From a feminist perspective, I argue that imperialism's racial, gender, and class hierarchies combined with the Third Republic's paternalism and misogyny to give French

men unprecedented power over their Asian subjects, especially Vietnamese women, be they prostitutes, concubines, or victims of sexual assault. This intersectionality created an openly predatory sexual culture in the overwhelmingly male white community of colonizers. These cartoons show specific locations in Hanoi and greater colonial Asia, providing insight into the lived experience of the colonial city and information to literally map these white men's sexual desires in the city.

Sex and the Colonial City: Mapping Masculinity, Whiteness, and Desire in French Occupied Hanoi

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OPENING the pages of some of Hanoi's French language newspapers in the mid-1890s, one would find caricatures, cartoons, and poems about life in the colonial city. The work of bored French administrators, officers, and civilians in a homosocial community, often the topics were jocular critiques of local politics, frustrations with the various shortcomings of life in the colonial tropics, and a wide range of comments on the cities' illicit diversions such as drinking binges, opium use, and prostitution. The weekly *La Vie Indo-Chinoise*, which ran from November 1896 to April 1898, stood out as a particularly ribald collection of images, verse, and prose. Regardless of their dubious contribution to French art and literature, these cartoons are extremely useful for cultural historians of the colonial encounter. They are artifacts of conversations amongst French colonial men. As such, they display an openness and frankness lacking in the official representations of the French empire and the all too commonly optimistic boosterism or misleading propaganda. Contemporaries praised the authors for capturing the realities of colonial life.¹ By probing this seemingly banal and untapped source of documents, we can reconstruct the male French colonial self-image in Hanoi and how the colonizer saw the colonized and the colonial city. More specifically, these sources allow for a cultural history of white male sexual desire that can be literally mapped onto colonial Hanoi, as well as various port cities in Asia during the age of

¹ Louis Bonnafort, "Pufface," in *Soyons Sincères!*, ed. Alfred Cézard (Hanoi: Schneider, 1904).



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