

Decadent Indochina
and French Colonial Literature
1880s to 1920s



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Short Abstract

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This thesis investigates the long-neglected relationship between Decadence and colonialism at the *fin de siècle* which also coincided with the age of France's high imperialism. Generally considered a European literary and cultural movement, Decadence has rarely been examined outside its Western boundaries, not least in connection with the empire. The *fin-de-siècle* colonial literature of Indochina emerges as a particularly compelling case reflecting a complex interplay between Decadence and colonialism, aesthetics and politics, at a time when France was seeking to redefine its national identity in relation to the increasingly significant concept of *la plus Grande France* and in opposition to other European powers.

By combining colonial discourse analysis with postcolonial and cultural studies approaches, with special emphasis on a historicist approach, this thesis engages in close readings of novels, short stories and poetry written by a number of French travellers and colonisers, most notably Paul Bonnetain, Jules Boissière, Albert de Pouvourville, Claude Farrère, Myriam Harry, Clotilde Chivas-Baron, and Jeanne Leuba. In particular it focuses on three key decadent tropes: opium, subversive sexualities, and the allure of the *néant* seen in terms of both spirituality and the ruins of past civilisations. Reading Decadence against colonial ideology and in relation with a wide range of *fin-de-siècle* scholarly and popular discourses, reveals that the decadent articulation of the colonial encounter is fundamentally *political*, in contrast to its perceived aestheticist detachment. Through its ambiguous propensity for revelling in what it deprecates, decadent literature often introduces ambivalence and oppositional counter-narratives disrupting the colonialist foundations

on which the French rule in Indochina and the neat boundaries between coloniser and colonised are built. A postcolonial reading of decadent literature suggests the presence of 'critical Decadence' that points to a need to reassess the monolithic pro-colonial view of colonial literature.

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Long Abstract

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Decadent Indochina and French Colonial Literature, 1880s to 1920s sets out to explore how Decadence informs the representations of the Franco-Indochinese intercultural contact within the *fin-de-siècle* colonial literature of Indochina. To do so, this thesis examines the long-neglected relationship between Decadence and colonialism as it is played out in colonial literature written at the turn of the twentieth-century by French travellers and the colonisers of France's newly conquered territory in Southeast Asia (the administrative term 'Union indochinoise' dates to 1887). While exotic and colonial literature is often read as evidence of a colonialist ideology which draws on the discourse of degeneration to project the colonised as primitive and/or degenerate and decadent, and while theorists of Decadence have highlighted the exoticist imagery pervading *fin-de-siècle* literature, a critical analysis that foregrounds the close connection between literary Decadence and colonial ideology remains relatively uncharted territory.

By combining colonial discourse analysis with postcolonial and cultural studies approaches, with special emphasis on a historicist approach, this thesis examines the multiple ways in which decadent attitudes and themes are explored in the colonial literature of Indochina as a paradigm that allows for a mobile and ambiguous articulation of colonial experiences, ranging from the expected pro-colonial attitudes, but also the hesitations, ambivalence and sometimes resistance to a monolithic colonialist attitude. This oppositional potential derives from Decadence's inherently ambivalent and self-reflexive nature which ostensibly co-opts an anti-decadent attitude while taking on decadent postures, and situates Decadence at times among the colonisers and at other times among the colonised. This trans-frontier criss-crossing often blurs

the rigid boundaries drawn by colonial rule between the dominating coloniser and the dominated colonised, revealing a surprisingly complex relationship at the heart of the colonial contact. As such, not only the images of the Indochinese Other are constructed as multifaceted, at times contradictory – as decadent and over-civilised *and/or* primitive and under-civilised – but the political, cultural and identity images of the French themselves are constantly being redrawn accordingly. What happens at this micro-level of interrelation seems to reflect the true nature of colonial rule which, despite its effort at neat separation, shifts between exclusion and inclusion, between delineating boundaries and strengthening a mutually-constitutive relationship. This is in tune with recent scholarship, particularly in history and anthropology, which reveals more complex and nuanced histories of empires marked by many internal dissonances and contradictions, particularly at the level of day-to-day encounters and practices, in contrast to what they wanted to project to themselves and their colonial subjects.

In examining Decadence's ambivalent attitude *vis-à-vis* colonialism, I argue that despite its apparent aestheticist posture of aloofness and detachment from the material world, Decadence in the colonial context is revealed to be fundamentally *political* and at times overtly politicised. What I term 'critical Decadence' is characterised by this inherent oppositional potential of Decadence to disrupt colonialist narrative, enabling a questioning of racial and cultural difference and provoking an epistemological breach in the West's confidence in its all-conquering knowledge and power. This occurs within the specific historical context of colonisation where maintaining of boundaries was essential to French and European rule. As such, in contrast to the traditional view of Decadence as a French and Euro-centric movement, Decadence travels beyond its Western boundaries ever since its emergence and takes on a *colonial* identity. While seemingly abetting colonial discourse, the 'colonial Decadence' that emerges from and is embedded within the unequal Franco-Indochinese contact can be seen, I argue, as a historical and aesthetic form of criticism of, and at times resistance to, colonialism as well as to modernity itself – in both its metropolitan and colonial forms – which colonialism forms an inherent part of.

This thesis engages in literary close readings of novels, short stories and poetry written at the *fin de siècle* by a number of French travellers and colonisers, most notably Paul Bonnetain, Jules Boissière, Albert de Pouvourville, Claude Farrère, Myriam Harry, Clotilde Chivas-Baron, Alfred Droin, René Crayssac, and Jeanne Leuba. The three chapters are thematically organised around three key colonial tropes: opium, gender and sexuality, and mysticism and spirituality. Alongside colonial discourse and Decadence, my corpus will be examined within the cultural, sociological, intellectual and political context of *fin-de-siècle* France and global inter-imperial rivalries, as well as in relation to a wide range of *fin-de-siècle* scholarly and popular discourses.

In Chapter One, opium, which represents one of the key themes linked to emerging literary modernity in the *métropole*, provides a point of entry into the colonial universe of decadent Indochina. By focusing on Paul Bonnetain's novel, Jules Boissière's and Claude Farrère's short stories, I show how Indochinese opium was articulated by these authors either as a mastering *tool* for the first French 'invaders' (opium seen as a panacea against the *mal du pays* as well as an initiation into the native culture) or a creative medium for aestheticism (for both coloniser and colonised). The topos belongs in fact to a double historicity. Represented as a timeless exotic commodity, Indochinese opium is also enmeshed in colonial politics, reflecting the political state into which Indochina was propelled by colonisation and globalisation. Its perceived hallucinatory and intellectual powers (often rendered through the *fantastique*) subjects the boundaries of the French self to scrutiny, provoking an existential crisis (embodied in the figures of the *décivilisé* and the traumatised ex-colonial soldier) as well as an ontological breach that allows for a sense of fraternity with, or at least an invited opening towards, the colonised other. Through close readings of the passages in which these ontological and epistemological questionings come to the surface, I argue that the temptation of decadent opium introduces an oppositional counter-narrative into colonial discourse and that this is an inherent component of colonial literature of Indochina since its conception. As such, I suggest that 'critical Decadence' is a key feature of Decadence seen as both a symptom of and a reaction against metropolitan *and* colonial modernity.

Chapter Two maps out an erotic cartography of French Indochina through three key figures associated with decadent sexual ‘anarchy’ in Indochina, namely the *femme fatale*, the androgyne and the homosexual. I foreground the question of race in its intersection with sexuality since unconventional sexualities and sexual practices in feminised Indochina are often racialised and pathologized as atavistic and hereditary, in tune with *fin-de-siècle* medical discourse and evolutionist views of the colonised peoples. More than opiate intoxication, erotic and carnal intercultural encounters in Indochina are revealed to be problematic for the bourgeois French rule. Established after the turn of the century, the bourgeois rule followed the end of the period of uncertainties known as the ‘pacification’ which marked the first period of colonisation. What I demonstrate is the constant negotiations of the racial boundaries between coloniser and colonised through various degrees and forms of sexual intermixing. Framed within the decadent *and* colonial projects, the ambivalent attraction and repulsion of decadent erotic desire both re-inscribe the dominance of the colonising power and, at the same time, reveal the porosity and fragility of this dominance. Along with this boundary crossing, I show that decadent sexuality is also framed creatively, particularly in the case of Pouvoirville, as a means to address and redefine modern masculinity, re-inventing what is usually seen as perverse and decadent into a regenerative force while maintaining its subversive unorthodox potential. From this perspective, the decadent sexual project heralds the spiritual syncretic project examined in the last chapter. An example of self-reflexive Decadence is also analysed through Farrère’s satiric portrayal of a homosexual decadent coloniser who is represented both as a critique of metropolitan bourgeois morality and a caricature of the decadent posture.

Throughout these first two chapters, is the suggestion that the tension between degeneration/Decadence and regeneration/anti-Decadence structures the dynamisms of the colonial literature of Indochina. This tension becomes even more central in the trope of the *néant oriental* examined in Chapter Three. I focus on the two interconnected embodiments of the *néant*: Buddhism and Far Eastern spiritualities, and the allure of the Khmer ruins. Both are linked to the

fin-de-siècle fascination with mysticism and the spiritual, as well as reflect the nineteenth-century obsession with history, encouraged by the discoveries of extra-European ancient cultures and religions. They are to be understood in the context of the emergence of related discourses such as the occult revival, the concept of world religions, and developments in archaeology and museology. I trace the evolving trajectory within which the Far Eastern *néant* is articulated first through the decadent imagery of perversity and terrifying menace before being recuperated as an anti-decadent regenerative force by the desire for syncretism in both its religious and cultural forms. I contend that this syncretic desire reflects an attempt to contribute to a redefinition of the 'Greater French' identity by appropriating Asian wisdom and its past into the boundaries of 'la plus grande France'. This was in line with the self-refashioning of these authors as being an active part of the new cultural identity of the *Français d'Asie*. The chapter ends with a suggestion that this identificatory strategy heralds the decline of Decadence in favour of a more objective vein of colonial literature that would be promoted by its theorists from the 1910s onwards.

While I organise the chapters thematically, my close analysis of the primary texts attempts to address various narrative modes that can be said to represent generic tendencies adopted by colonial Decadence. This includes the *fantastique*; the ethnologically-oriented tale inspired by the native legends and folklore; short stories; and, last but perhaps the most characteristic, poetry. This generic and stylistic variety suggests the extent to which Decadence as a 'travelling concept', to use Edward Said's term, adapts and enriches its mode of expression to incorporate what is specific about the new geographical reality. The production and recycling of exotic stereotypes and clichés to their saturation point also represent another key feature of Decadence which can be seen as evidence of Decadence's self-parody as well as the sentiment of belatedness symptomatic of colonial modernity, in which exotic difference itself is doomed to disappear. Within the context of a globalised world, even a faraway tropical land like Indochina undergoes modernisation and homogenisation as a result of colonial contact. Decadence's insistence on the hackneyed nature of exoticism suggests a very modernist attitude of self-reflexivity that is revealed to be even more

prominent through the process of displacement, repositioning and transplantation of metropolitan Decadence into the colonial condition.

By demonstrating the complex ways in which Decadence is strategically deployed by French authors in their fiction of Indochina and by situating it within the historical context of *fin-de-siècle* France and the global politics, I hope to show that the colonial literature of Indochina, particularly during its early period, is multifarious and characterised by complexity, nuances and even contradictions in its ideological position *vis-à-vis* colonialism. Even in the most overtly pro-colonial texts, a potential oppositionality seems to be suggested in passages articulated through decadent attitude and aesthetics. This is in contradiction with the contemporary critical view dominant in postcolonial criticism that tends to portray a monolithic pro-colonial view of colonial literature. While the postcolonial strategy of using colonial literature as a foil to examine postcolonial literature as a form of resistance is helpful, it nonetheless fails to address in a *longue durée* perspective the more nuanced and complex view pertaining to the legacies – whether it is their continuation, rupture or reconfiguration – of the colonial era. Postcolonial themes and preoccupations such as *métissage*, hybridity and resistance as well as the on-going process of imperial ‘ruinations’ at work in contemporary literary, cultural and political practices gain a greater critical perspective when read comparatively with an awareness of colonial culture.

On the other hand, by postcolonising colonial literature in its relation to Decadence, I hope to partake in the re-evaluation of the study of colonial literature by moving it away from nostalgia for the luxuriant colonial life in the tropics which seems to have recently resurfaced in the publishing and bibliophilic sphere. Following the nostalgic revival of colonial Indochina in the late twentieth century in France, a more critical and nuanced awareness has been put forward by republications of French colonial literature concerning Indochina and the Far East. Within this renewal of interest in colonial Indochina, the needs for an awareness of the colonial agenda underpinning the texts as well as a re-evaluation of the colonial imagination against postcolonial concerns is even more apparent.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to open up reflections on the significant role of Decadence outside its centre and within a wider global context. This critical stance is in line with a resurgence of Decadence studies, and particularly, the transnational and transtemporal view of Decadence as argued by critics such as Regenia Gagnier and Robert Stilling. Working towards the breaking down of the neat boundaries between the *métropole* and the empire by virtue of Decadence's transgressivity and playfulness, my thesis resonates particularly with Stilling's cogent study of the appropriation of *fin-de-siècle* metropolitan Decadence in Anglophone postcolonial poetry.¹ When looking at the literature of French colonial Indochina, we may see that this postcolonial appropriation of Decadence's critical and oppositional tools was already the subject of some degree of experimentation in colonial times. This is not to mention the possible connection – in all its forms, from recuperation to rejection – between French colonial literature (and its decadent aestheticism) and postcolonial Vietnamese literature, that remains to be explored. Understanding colonial Decadence might help us think critically and comparatively about transnational and postcolonial Decadence, or in other words a Decadence that has been undergoing constant processes of transplantation, appropriation and transformation since it began to travel globally at its emergence at the *fin de siècle*.

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¹ Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018).

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Conventions

The MHRA style is used for bibliographical references in this thesis with the footnotes system.

I have chosen to omit diacritics for the Vietnamese names and words for facility and practicality in view of the main reader of French studies.

Contemporary readers might find some terms such as ‘les indigènes’ (translated as ‘native’ or ‘indigenous’), ‘les Jaunes’ (Yellow people) problematic. They are used for historical anchoring in keeping with the French usage at the time and as a delineating marker between the colonised and the coloniser. This racial demarcation is maintained in this thesis to reflect the dominant French outlook but, as will become clear, it is constantly put under scrutiny in my analysis.

Key poems examined in this thesis are transcribed in the Annex. This is indicated in footnotes as ‘See Annex no.’.

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Introduction

‘Postcolonising’ Decadence in Colonial Indochina

In 2005, France saw an unprecedented resurgence of public and scholarly debates concerning French colonial history and its ongoing repercussions in French contemporary society. This was prompted particularly by a series of events: the provocative declaration of the ‘Indigènes de la République’,¹ the proposed law for school curricula to recognise the positive role of the French presence overseas, and the ‘révolte des banlieues’ at the end of the year. The latter was a wave of urban violence and confrontations with the police that started off in the ‘cités’ around Paris before becoming national in scale, against the international backdrop of the ‘war on terror’ launched in the early 2000s. Triggered by the death of two young *cité*-dwellers of Clichy-sous-Bois during a police check, this collective protest lasted for three weeks and had at its forefront the actions of the French youth, many of them of North African and African ancestry.² The ensuing debates brought up socio-economic considerations, racism, immigration, discrimination as well as the French Republican model of ‘intégration’, which were discussed in light of colonial memory and colonial amnesia, deeply ingrained in French society, by a group of scholars working on the French Empire and its postcolonial

¹ ‘Appel pour les assises de l’anticolonialisme postcolonial: Nous sommes les Indigènes de la République!’ was published in January 2005. The association was created later in the same year and became in 2010 a political party whose aim is to fight against colonialism, imperialism and racial hierarchisation. See <http://indigenes-republique.fr/> [accessed 8 October 2019].

² For a summary of events see Didier Lapeyronnie, ‘Révolte primitive dans les banlieues françaises’, *Déviance et Société*, 30 (2006), 431–48.

aftermath.³ The word ‘postcolonial’ thus entered French public and intellectual life polemically, becoming enmeshed in current socio-political issues more than it has ever been in the Anglo-American world where postcolonial studies emerged primarily from academia and was gradually institutionalised throughout the 1980s and 1990s as both a body of theory and a field of study.

This controversy focused largely on Sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, leaving the French colony of Indochina quasi-absent despite more than eighty years of French rule (approximately 1863 to 1954) as well as various forms of violence and domination its population had endured during and after the Empire.⁴ In a similar manner, also left at the periphery of these debates was the diasporic population issued from this former colony – today’s Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians – whose descendants form Asian communities living in France now.⁵ Seen as peaceful, if not invisible, in the general public

³ See in particular Pascal Blanchard and others, *Vers la guerre des identités? De la fracture coloniale à la révolution ultranationale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016), *Retours du colonial? Disculpation et réhabilitation de l’histoire coloniale française*, ed. by Catherine Coquio (Nantes: Atalante, 2008), and Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire, *La Fracture coloniale: la société française au prisme de l’héritage colonial* (Paris: La Découverte/Poche, [2005] 2006). The ‘postcolonial’ themes addressed by these scholars were often dismissed by mainstream social and political critics in the media as politically engaged and unscholarly, while shifting the focus from this controversial connection with the French colonial past to a traditional socio-political framework such as unemployment, ghettoization, discriminatory police control, suburban violence, as well as the failure of the French Left. On this topic, see Laurent Bonelli, ‘Révolte des banlieues. Les raisons d’une colère’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 2005, pp. 1 and 22-3. The quasi-absence of discussions about race and immigration in this article can be seen as symptomatic of a certain attitude that tends to ignore the issues of racial difference in the name of the French Republic’s colour-blindness and universalism. Another hostile attitude against this postcolonial inquiry came from the conservative camp and received good coverage in the French media: the counter-offensive adopted by politicians, particularly the then minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy and a group of scholars promoting colonial nostalgia. Daniel Lefevre’s *Pour en finir avec la repentance nationale* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006) and Pascal Bruckner’s *La Tyrannie de la pénitence* (Paris: Grasset, 2006) were seen as the spearhead of this position. For a discussion of the critical approach to the discourses on the colonial history as well as the symptomatic counter-offensive, see Coquio, Catherine, ‘Retours du colonial?’, in *Retours du colonial?*, pp. 9-43.

⁴ The website of the *Indigènes de la République* omits the Franco-Asians and mentions only ‘les Noirs, les Arabes et les musulmans.’ On this remark, see also Klein, Jean-François, ‘L’histoire de l’Indochine en situation coloniale: entre histoire et orientalisme (1858-1959)’, in *La Construction du discours colonial: l’empire français aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, ed. by Oissila Saaidia and Laurick Zerbin (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2009), pp. 89-123.

⁵ According to Daniel Hémerly, Vietnamese immigration for the metropolitan France began in a systematic manner from 1910-11, notably concerning workers and students (‘Du Patriotisme au marxisme: l’immigration vietnamienne en France de 1926 à 1930’, *Le Mouvement social*, 90 (January-March 1975), 3-54 (p. 5). In his study of the immigration of Southeast Asian people to France, Huu Khoa Le categorises the immigration periods into four: before 1945, 1954-75, 1975-79 (when France started to welcoming political refugees from this region) and finally after 1980 (*Réfugiés asiatiques de France*, ed. by Huu Khoa Le (Paris: Groupement pour les droits des minorités, 1990). By 1990s, the number of Vietnamese refugees living in France was estimated at 200,000, 80,000 of them in the Parisian region. As indicated by Louis-Jacques Dorais in his transnational study of the

opinion, these Franco-Asians appear to have been well integrated into the French Republic, in stark contrast with other ethnic communities from former colonies.

However, during the 2010s, against the backdrop of national debates on ‘identité nationale’,⁶ the Asian communities gradually emerged to the forefront of the socio-political scene. A series of protests in Paris and its suburbs were led by the Chinese community following aggressions and fatal attacks deliberately targeting its members in 2010 and 2011. More protests that attracted wide media coverage were organised again in 2016 and 2017 following the death of two Chinese in Aubervilliers and Paris respectively. What started off as a demonstration against ‘l’insécurité’ in 2010 became a ‘lutte anti-discriminatoire’ against racism and ‘préjugés anti-asiatiques’ as well as a call for the redefinition of republican values.⁷ All this tension coincided with the politico-military actions and heated debates around home-grown terrorism that marked the particularly tragic year of 2015 (with the Charlie Hebdo shooting in January and the co-ordinated Paris attacks in November). Although this political movement was mainly initiated by Chinese immigrants and the Franco-Chinese, the racialised rhetoric perceived to be the underlying causes of these racist attacks against the Franco-Chinese has been directed against the ‘Asiatiques de France’ in general without regard for regional or individual cultural identities: ‘Les préjugés sur leur condition physique jouent

overseas Vietnamese refugees and their identity politics, it is impossible to know the exact official number of Franco-Vietnamese living in France since the French state recorded their national origin as long as they were foreigners and stopped after they became French citizens (‘Vietnamese Communities in Canada, France and Denmark’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 11 (1998), 107-25 (p. 114). One can assume the same situation for immigrants and their descendants coming from other countries of former Indochina, given that France never includes questions about race or ethnicity in official censuses. While there have been many studies of refugees from the former French Indochina in refugee studies, they were mostly undertaken in the 1990s and focused on the political aspect of the Indochinese diaspora, the treatment they received in Europe as well as their links to homeland politics. Contemporary issues related to French Asians in France remain relatively understudied.

⁶ This national debate was launched by the then Minister of National Identity and Immigration (now abolished) Éric Besson under Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency in 2009. A website was set up as a public platform for debates between French citizens. It quickly turned into an anti-immigrant arena and was taken down. For the postcolonial criticism against this ‘reactionary’ initiative, see the call from the ‘Collectif pour “un vrai débat”’ <https://achac.com/colonisation-et-post-colonialisme/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Appel-pour-un-veritable-debat.pdf> [accessed 8 October 2019].

⁷ Ya-Han Chuang, ‘La Colère du *Middleman*: quand la communauté chinoise se manifeste’, *Movements*, 4 (2017), 157-68. According to Chuang, this redefinition of republican values focused on the concept of double cultural identity as well as the reinterpretation of the concept of ‘sécurité’, hitherto closely linked to right-wing parties’ emphasis on law and order, to cover all citizens and residents regardless their race, ‘origine’ and their ‘quartiers’.

également en leur défaveur: ils et elles sont considérées comme frêles, risquant ainsi moins de se défendre physiquement. L'ensemble de ces vulnérabilités et préjugés fait des ressortissants chinois et asiatiques des cibles privilégiées de la petite délinquance'.⁸ This statement is reminiscent of representations of France's Indochinese subjects during the colonial period. Echoes of the colonial era should also be understood in light of the historical and ethnic complexity of the Chinese community in France: indeed, the first Chinese immigrants were mainly from the diaspora within Indochina.⁹ This racial stereotype may appear to be insignificant; it nonetheless reveals a deeply ingrained stigma which still structures current relations among ethno-racial groups in France.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Decadent Indochina and French Colonial Literature, 1880s to 1920s sets out to explore the French politics of representation regarding Indochina and its people by looking at its systematic construction during the French colonisation of the region at the end of the nineteenth century. In so doing, it seeks on the one hand to engage with theoretical currents associated with postcolonial and cultural studies, with an emphasis on a historicist approach. On the other hand, informed by nineteenth-century studies within the wider field of French studies, *Decadent Indochina* engages in a dialogue with one of the main discourses circulating in metropolitan France and Europe at the *fin de siècle* as part of European modernity, namely

⁸ Chuang, 'La colère du *Middleman*', p. 158.

⁹ *Guide de la communauté chinoise en France, 1991-1992*, ed. by N. G. Yok-Soon (Paris: Éditions les Cent Fleurs, 1991), p. 121, and Huu Khoa Le, *Les Réfugiés du Sud-Est asiatique en France* (Paris: Agence pour le développement des relations interculturelles, 1990), pp. 14-5. According to Yu-Sion Live, immigration from mainland China to France started off during the First World War when they were recruited as workers. He estimates the number of Chinese immigrants in France before 1975 at approximately 15,000 individuals ('Aspects de l'immigration chinoise en France', in *Réfugiés asiatiques de France*, p. 33). For sociological studies of the 'quartier chinois', see Yu-Sion Live, 'Les Asiatiques: immigrations et représentations', *Hommes & Migrations*, 1168 (1993), 31-37, and 'Les Chinois de Paris depuis le début du siècle. Présence urbaine et activités économiques', *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, 8 (1992), 155-73. Its theoretical limitations notwithstanding, for a study of Sino-French cultural exchanges and an argument in favour of recognition of a Francophone mainland China, see Mathilde Kang, *Francophonie en Orient: aux croisements France-Asie (1840-1940)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017). See also articles in the issue on 'France-Asia: Cultural Identity and Creative Exchange', *L'Esprit Créateur*, ed. by Aimée Boutin and Elizabeth Emery (Fall 2016), vol. 56, No. 3.

cultural and literary Decadence. Reading colonial literature on Indochina written by French travellers and the colonisers *contrapuntally*¹⁰ in its connection with Decadence, I examine the intertwining relationship between politics and aesthetics, that is, between colonial ideology and decadent representations of Indochina and of imperial France.

In line with recent scholarship, particularly in history and anthropology, which has revealed the more complex and nuanced histories of empires, my analysis will bring out not only the expected pro-colonial attitudes but also hesitations, ambivalences and sometimes resistance to a monolithic colonialist attitude, even within some overtly pro-colonial texts. The concept of ambivalence has been systematically theorised by postcolonial criticism, which has drawn on postmodern theories to shed light on the complex ways in which colonial and postcolonial subjects resist oppressive colonial authority in their appropriation and embodiment of colonial discourse. With a few notable exceptions, ambivalence has however been relatively neglected by the very same critics in their discussion of *colonial* literature.¹¹ In other words, colonial literature is often too readily dismissed as monolithically colonialist by postcolonial criticism, often as a strategic step in arguing for a truly innovative strategy of resistance deployed by postcolonial subjects and texts. While this critical stance is arguably legitimate and valuable, it nonetheless fails to address a more contentious issue: the dialectical movement between colonialist and oppositional, even at times *anti-colonial*, discourses, may already be present within colonial texts. This is apparent not least in texts drawing on the metropolitan decadent movement.

¹⁰ Edward Said's contrapuntal reading is developed in his *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993). He reads texts from the metropolitan 'centre' against those on the similar images and themes from the 'periphery', with 'a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts' (p. 59). It analyses literature as inherently imbricated in political and social history, with a focus on colonial history and addresses both the perspective of imperialism and the resistance to it.

¹¹ These exceptions are mostly found in the scholarship of English literature, see particularly the theorisation of the 'Third Space' developed by Bhabha in a series of articles in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), and also Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York, London: Routledge, 2013), Elleke Boehmer, *Empire Writing: An Anthology of Colonial Literature, 1870-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 'Oxford world's classics', 1998), and Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995).

By virtue of their trans-evaluative nature that refuses to be easily accommodated within accepted conventions and values, the decadent attitudes and themes explored by the authors of the texts under examination in this thesis are, I argue, a crucial paradigm that allows for a mobile and multifarious articulation of colonial experiences, albeit in the form of imaginative and often exotico-aestheticised representation, dubbed by Panivong Norindr as ‘phantasmatic Indochina’.¹²

While colonial ideology was a powerful, yet ambiguous, presence in colonial literature, there was also a rich cross-fertilisation at play during the *fin de siècle* between literary and scientific discourses – scholarly as well as popular –, some of them lasting until today, while others fell into disfavour due to historical contingency. These discourses will also be examined in their connections with Decadence, colonialism and this Far Eastern colony.

In tune with Charles Forsdick and Jennifer Yee’s programmatic call for a ‘Postcolonial Nineteenth Century’, my study works towards ‘postcolonialising’¹³ Decadence by showing that in contrast to the traditional view of Decadence being a French and European-focused movement, it has travelled beyond its Western boundaries since its emergence and took on a *colonial* identity. The decadent articulation of the colonial encounter brings to light Decadence’s fundamentally *political* nature in contradiction with its apparent aestheticist posture of aloofness and detachment from the material world. Emerging from and embedded within the unequal Franco-Indochinese contact, ‘colonial Decadence’ can be seen as a historical and aesthetic form of criticism of, and at times resistance to, colonialism as well as modernity itself – in both its metropolitan *and* colonial forms – which colonialism forms an inherent part of. It is this oppositional aestheticism which I term ‘critical Decadence’ that underlines my analysis of the corpus. The three key Decadent tropes –

¹² Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham; London: Duke University Press 1996).

¹³ Charles Forsdick and Jennifer Yee, ‘Towards a Postcolonial Nineteenth Century: Introduction’, *French Studies: A Quarterly Review*, 72 (2018), 167-75. On the concept of ‘postcolonialising’ literary texts, see Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice, or Process?* (Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 7-12 and 21.

opium, subversive sexualities, and the allure of the *néant* seen in terms of both spirituality and the ruins of past civilisations – will be the main focus of the three chapters constituting this thesis.

My contrapuntal examination of the interplay between colonial literature and Decadence thus focuses on the ambiguous and self-reflexive nature of Decadence, which ostensibly co-opts an anti-decadent attitude while taking on decadent postures, situating Decadence at times among the colonisers and at other times among the colonised. This trans-frontier criss-crossing often blurs the rigid boundaries drawn by colonial rule between the dominating coloniser and the dominated colonised, revealing a surprisingly complex relationship at the heart of the colonial contact. This premise of ambivalence will reveal its fullest significance in the complex relationship between Decadence and colonial ideology. As such, not only multifarious images of the Indochinese Other are constructed, but the political and cultural images of the French themselves are constantly being redrawn. What happens at this micro-level of interrelation seems to reflect the true nature of colonial rule which, despite its effort at neat separation, shifts between exclusion and inclusion, between delineating boundaries and strengthening a mutually-constitutive relationship.

FRENCH INDOCHINA IN HISTORY AND LITERARY STUDIES

Historical studies of colonial Indochina have tended to be embedded within either an orientalist discourse that focuses on Indochinese antiquity, or colonial history narrated in an almost celebratory tone, as Jean-François Klein has argued. These two general trends covered the colonial period until the 1950s.¹⁴ The first rupture occurred after the 1950s with the emergence of studies of ‘aires culturelles’, corroborated by the ‘Nouvelle Histoire’ movement spearheaded by Jacques Le Goff from the late 1960s.¹⁵ The end of the Cold War

¹⁴ Jean-François, Klein, ‘L’histoire de l’Indochine en situation coloniale’.

¹⁵ Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier, and Jacques Revel, *La Nouvelle histoire* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, [1978] 1988).

and the foundation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 contributed to a new interest in contemporary issues in the countries of the region. For the historiography of the colonial period, the monograph co-written by Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery published in 1995 marked the first truly critical engagement with Indochina, presenting a more nuanced and complex historical analysis which is not aligned with either the emerging anti-colonial nationalist narrative or the nostalgic apologetic view of French colonisation.¹⁶ To this day, this study remains a central reference for the French as well as global readership, thanks to its cross-spatial interest covering the whole period of colonisation.

The groundbreaking works on African and Caribbean colonial history and iconography undertaken by the *Association Connaissance de l'Histoire de l'Afrique Contemporaine* or ACHAC (founded in 1989) may have an Indochinese equivalent in a smaller group, *Mémoire d'Indochine*, led by François Guillemot of the *École normale supérieure de Lyon* (ENS Lyon) and *Institut d'études politiques de Lyon* (IEP Lyon). However, while the former primarily aims at placing colonial questions at the heart of French intellectual and public life, the latter focuses on alternative or oral histories of decolonised Indochina and does not explicitly deal as much with the issues of contemporary Franco-Asians in France.¹⁷ While the ACHAC historians have always been marginal in French academia,¹⁸ the *Mémoire d'Indochine* group has found a foothold within academic institutions, perhaps owing to its disciplinary

¹⁶ Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochine: la colonisation ambiguë, 1858-1954* (Paris: Découverte, 1995). In their 'Foreword to the English-language edition' in 2009, the prominent Anglophone historians of Vietnam, Fredrik Logevall and Christopher E. Goscha place this monograph within the political and academic context from which it emerged in France and describe it as 'the first full-length history of French colonialism and Vietnamese nationalism in the English language', thus also testifying to the scant attention paid to the history of colonial Indochina (*Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley, California; London: University of California Press, [2009] 2011), p. xi).

¹⁷ See the website <https://indomemoires.hypotheses.org> [accessed 10 October 2019].

¹⁸ This is not only because of the peripheral location of colonial history within the discipline of history in general, but also because most of the members operate from outside the mainstream institution of French 'grandes universités' (Alice Bennington, '(Re)Writing Empire? The Reception of Post-Colonial Studies in France', 59 (2016), 1157-86 (p. 1183)).

identity within Vietnamese and Southeast Asian studies which is seen as less threatening than the ACHAC group's association with polemical current affairs.¹⁹

In contrast to the social sciences, the delayed engagement with postcolonialism in the fields of cultural and literary studies has affected the location of Indochina within French intellectual life.²⁰ Of course, there has been a longstanding French tradition of 'exoticism' (a point we shall return to), and the researchers affiliated with the *Société internationale d'étude des littératures de l'ère coloniale* (SIELEC) can be seen as deriving from this tradition. But here too Indochina was often relegated to the margins.²¹ It is only recently that there has been a new surge of interest accompanied by a renewal of perspectives on colonial and postcolonial literatures with regard to the region. The newly opened website 'France – Vietnam: Un portail entre les cultures' run by Giang Huong Nguyen, the subject consultant for the collections 'Langues et littératures de l'Asie du Sud-Est' at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF)

¹⁹ For this new orientation in Indochinese historiography in French, see also Charles Fourniau, *Vietnam. Domination coloniale et résistance nationale (1858-1914)* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2002), and *Le Contact colonial franco-vietnamien: le premier demi-siècle, 1858-1911*, ed. by Fourniau Charles, Trinh Van Thao, and Gilles de Gantès (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1999). Until now, there has been a disparity in the history studies of the three former colonies with Vietnam dominating the field, followed respectively by Cambodia and Laos. See also the still active *Société Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer* (SFHOM) founded in 1912. Despite the title's colonial overtone, the SFHOM as a platform of dissemination seems to welcome new perspectives introduced by postcolonialism and other new approaches.

²⁰ The resistance to postcolonial theory in the French academia has provoked a plethora of studies and discussions. For a good synthesis of previous studies of this troubled reception as well as the institutional and ideological contexts, see Bennington, '(Re)Writing Empire? The Reception of Post-Colonial Studies in France', 1157-86.

²¹ One of the reasons may lie in the chronology of the French conquest in Indochina which took place at the end of the nineteenth century when the heyday of exoticism traditionally associated with the Mediterranean Orient had withered away in French literature in general. This is not to diminish the studies of literature of Indochina inaugurated in the 1990s by a group of scholars (working mainly from outside mainstream academia) such as Alain Ruscio, Henri Copin, Alain Quella-Villéger. Many of them are still actively enriching the field and are also working on other former colonies. However, while their works broke away from the ways in which colonial literature was stigmatised as merely colonialist, thus without scholarly interest, they were to various degrees informed by either their original discipline (Ruscio and Quella-Villéger were trained as historians) or traditional literary criticism without much attending critically to the conditions of discursive production, the structuring role of power relations, and the location of literature within wider discursive practices and within world political contexts, all aspects into which postcolonialism could provide an insight. Their publications were thus oriented by the desire to excavate the forgotten corpus as attested by their biographical and anthological approaches or the effort to analyse exoticist themes in tune with traditional criticism. See Alain Ruscio, 'Le Regard français sur le phénomène eurasiatique en Indochine française à travers les sources littéraires (1858-1954)', *L'Information psychiatrique*, 80, 6 (2004), 477-84, *L'Indochine des romans* (Paris; Pondichéry: Kailash, 2000), Henri Copin, *L'Indochine dans la littérature française des années vingt à 1954: exotisme et altérité* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), *Indochine: un rêve d'Asie*, ed. by Alain Quella-Villéger (Paris: Omnibus, 1995), and Alain Quella-Villéger, 'Roman colonial et anticolonialisme: Saïgon 1900 au temps des *Civilisés* de Claude Farrère', in *Question coloniale et écriture* (Poitiers: Le Torii Éditions; Les Études Asemistes, 1994), vol. 14, pp. 75-83.

and a member of the *Institut des Textes et Manuscrits Modernes* (ITEM/CNRS-ENS), can be seen as epitomising this new current within French academia.²² Alongside its social sciences focus rooted in Vietnamese studies, the main features of literary studies promoted by this website is its emphasis on contemporary Francophone Vietnamese literature.²³ This can be seen as an effort towards ‘postcolonialising’ the ‘études francophones’ which have formed a marginal part of *lettres modernes*, rendering it more inclusive by incorporating both contemporary Francophone Vietnamese writers and French writers of Southeast Asian origin.

This long overdue critical renewal within France can be seen as complementing the Anglo-American scholarship that began to engage with literary Indochina as well as Francophone Vietnamese literature as early as the 1980s in the wake of the postmodern turn. Following a first study of Francophone Vietnamese literature by Jack Yeager in 1987, in 1997 Panivong Norindr published a compelling monograph in the vein of cultural studies and postcolonial theory touching a wide range of subjects from literature to cinema and architecture particularly during the colonial period.²⁴ The postcolonial approach deployed in these studies attempts to reconcile the corollary disciplinary split between ‘colonial discourse analysis’ and postcolonialism for, as it has increasingly been acknowledged, ‘the discourses, structuring devices, and patterns of representation studied by postcolonialism are [...]

²² See its website <https://vietlitfr.hypotheses.org/> [accessed the 10 October 2019]. Giang Huong Nguyen is the author of the monograph *La Littérature vietnamienne francophone (1913-1986)* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018). Alain Guillemot remarks the ‘apports de l’école anglo-saxonne’ acknowledged by this study (‘Giang-Huong Nguyen, *La Littérature vietnamienne francophone (1913-1986)* (Book Review)’, *Moussons. Recherche en sciences humaines sur l’Asie du Sud-Est*, 33 (2019), 204-7). The seminar of the same name as the website which runs monthly during the academic year of 2018-9 was organised in collaboration with the laboratory Labex TransferS at the ENS Paris. The Labex TransferS forms part of the recent effort to reorganise the closely defined boundaries between disciplines in French academia within the context of the cross-disciplinary groupings of Parisian academic institutions called the *Initiative d’excellence Paris Sciences & Lettres*. Among other currents, postcolonialism and cultural studies approaches are mentioned as part of the scholarly objective of this laboratory, see <http://transfers.ens.fr/-programme-scientifique-> [accessed 9 October 2019].

²³ As for Cambodian and Laotian Francophone literature, there exists to date no prominent figure influencing France’s literary life, apart from the Cambodian director Rithy Panh (1964-present) who has been the subject of study in film and memory studies.

²⁴ Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina*, and Jack Andrew Yeager, *The Vietnamese Novel in French: A Literary Response to Colonialism* (Hanover, NH: University of New Hampshire, University Press of New England, 1987).

contemporaneous with colonialism, and not limited to the period following its so-called end (or transformation into neo-colonialism).²⁵

After the 2000s, echoing Edward Said's 2003 passing call for an 'Indochinese intellectual space' to be opened up,²⁶ the terrain became more active with studies of a wider range of subjects, approaches and periods—with an underlying programme of re-evaluating and cross-examining—the Indochinese corpus, often in relation to emerging world-systems and globalisation. The gender perspective has been explored particularly by Jennifer Yee in her study of the clichéd image of colonial women across the French empire.²⁷ Indochina forms a significant part in Yee's corpus with a comparative analysis that brings together the literature of other French colonies through a transnational perspective without homogenising them into a monolithic discourse. In a similar way, albeit exploring a different period and perspective, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen explores gender from the Vietnamese voices focusing on contemporary postcolonial writers.²⁸ More recently Leslie Barnes, focusing on the French canonical writers often associated with Indochina – André Malraux and Marguerite Duras – reassesses the role Indochina played in the formation and renewal of French literature, bringing the colony back to the empire in a way that questions the Franco-French grand narrative of canon formation.²⁹ As such, her study epitomises the continued critical attempt to cross-examine what are often split perspectives between the *métropole* and the colony, breaking down the rigid categories of the coloniser and the colonised as unilaterally dominant and dominated. In cultural studies, Nicola Cooper's monograph

²⁵ Forsdick and Yee, 'Towards a Postcolonial Nineteenth Century: Introduction', 167-75 (p. 168). Since its rise in the wake of Said's *Orientalism* and its fall at the end of the 1990s, 'colonial discourse analysis' came to be seen inaccurately as the intellectual enquiry prior to the emergence of postcolonial approach, if not its antagonistic kin. This view has been challenged by recent cultural and historical studies on the colonial period particularly from a gender and sexuality perspective, see for instance Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), and Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

²⁶ The 2003 foreword to *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, [1978] 2003), p. xi.

²⁷ *Clichés de la femme exotique: un regard sur la littérature coloniale française entre 1871 et 1914* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000).

²⁸ *Vietnamese Voices: Gender and Cultural Identity in the Vietnamese Francophone Novel* (DeKalb, Illinois: Southeast Asia Publications, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 2003).

²⁹ *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

explores the significance of French colonial discourse of Indochina on France's often contradictory perceptions and representations of its imperial identity, the legacy of the 1789 revolution and its style of colonisation.³⁰ An edited volume by Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee on *France and "Indochina": Cultural Representations* also exemplifies the breadth and scope of the new research, ranging from colonial Indochina to the postcolonial decolonised nations.³¹ There are also emerging studies in film studies, art history as well as theatre.³²

While a great amount of energy has been invested in the study of literary Indochina and its postcolonial production over the last two decades, with notable exceptions such as sociology-inspired studies on colonial literary culture by Vladimir Kapor,³³ much remains to be done towards the critical study of aesthetic and literary circulations and adaptations between the *métropole* and the colony during the colonial period. Transnational and comparative perspectives have been increasingly central to the study of Francophone postcolonial literature, but the same cannot be said for literature during the colonial period. For Indochina in particular, colonial literary culture was exceptionally vibrant and dynamic ever since the beginning of the conquest. Its emergence was not only closely linked to question of identity politics, nation building and the formation of colonial consciousness,

³⁰ *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001).

³¹ *France and "Indochina": Cultural Representations* (Lanham, Md. and Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005).

³² Tilman Baumgartel, 'The Civilizing Cinema Mission: Colonial Beginnings of Film in Indochina', in *Early cinema in Asia*, ed. by Nick Deocampo (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), pp. 179-206, *Le Théâtre français et l'Indochine. Revue d'histoire du théâtre*, ed. by Corinne Flicker (Paris: Société d'Histoire du Théâtre, 2014), vol. 264, Panivong Norindr, 'Enlisting early cinema in the service of "la plus grande France"', in *Early Cinema and the "National"*, ed. by Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini, and Rob King (New Barnet, Herts: Bloomington, IN: John Libbey, 2008), pp. 109-17, Marco Deyasi, 'French Visual Culture and "Indochina": Modernism, Primitivism, and Colonialism, 1889-1931' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Duke University, 2007), and Martine Astier Loufti, 'Imperial Frame: Film Industry and Colonial Representation', in *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism: Perspectives from the French and Francophone World*, ed. by Dina Sherzer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

³³ Vladimir Kapor, *Le Grand prix de littérature coloniale, 1921-1938: lauréats, jugements, controverse*, 2 vols (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2018), 'Provocation Versus Performativity: Launching la *Littérature Coloniale Française* in 1909', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 23 (2014), 1-18, and 'The *La Grande France* Circle (1900-1903): Littérature Coloniale, Transcolonial Synergies and the Belle Époque Avant-Gardes', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 16 (2013), 385-403. Kapor's studies will inform our discussion of the *Français d'Asie* group particularly in Chapter Three.

but was also deeply concerned with literary and aesthetic aspects, particularly in connection with the metropolitan centre.

DECADENCE AND INDOCHINA: A DELAYED CRITICAL DISCOURSE

It is with a desire to reconcile the political and the aesthetic and to make visible the networks – interpersonal, institutional and ideological – that link colonial literature to metropolitan literary culture that *Decadent Indochina* sets out to examine the colonial literature of Indochina in relation to French and European Decadence. This connection is even more compelling when one considers the historical circumstances. The French conquest of Indochina and the first French literary writings about Indochina coincided with the emergence of Decadence as both a literary movement and as a component of the socio-cultural zeitgeist. Decadence was a key aspect of French and wider European modernity, being both inseparable from and reacting against nineteenth-century notions of positivism and progress. Its highly versatile formulation, discourses, and worldview remained influential long into the twentieth century. In a precisely contemporary phenomenon, from the *fin de siècle* until its apotheosis in the 1930s, colonial culture was being fostered under France's Third Republic as part of the new national culture.³⁴ Indochina was a source of French national pride in the international arena as attested by the patriotic enthusiasm for the monumental reconstruction of the ancient Cambodian temple of Angkor Wat at the *Exposition coloniale internationale de Paris* in 1931, which was seen as one of the highlights of the French cultural and political achievement overseas.³⁵ Yet surprisingly, despite this self-evident historical connection, no systematic

³⁴ *Culture coloniale: la France conquise par son Empire, 1871-1931*, ed. by Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2003), and Raoul Girardet, *L'Idée coloniale en France de 1871 à 1962* (Paris: Table Ronde, 1972).

³⁵ Marco R. Deyasi, 'Indochina, "Greater France" and the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris: Angkor Wat in Blue, White and Red', *History Workshop Journal*, 80 (2015), 123-41.

study has yet engaged in a truly critical examination of the intersection between colonialism and literary Decadence.³⁶

In this present study, the term ‘colonialism’ will be used to refer to the direct political control and/or settlement of a foreign territory. In the case of France, the modern colonial period (in contrast to the earlier empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) can be said to start from the conquest of Algeria in 1830, with the 1880s-90s marked by heated political debates and overseas military frenzy, before reaching its peak—and downfall—in the 1930s.³⁷ A related, but distinct term to this specific politico-territorial one, ‘imperialism’ is taken in its broadest sense to refer to the extension of influence by economic and political means. Its use puts an emphasis on the politico-economic aspect as defined by Marx and Marxist-inspired thinkers following Lenin to reflect the emergence of a new competitive global economic and political system or ‘the radically altered forms to capitalism’s accelerated penetration of the non-capitalist zones’.³⁸ Imperialism is a dynamic system closely related to capitalism’s ‘international system of mutual rivalry for control of territories and resources between the different powers’.³⁹

Historically, in the French nineteenth century, ‘imperialism’ referred specifically to the two Bonapartist Empires of the nineteenth century. As such, the word ‘empire’ in French long remained suspect and came to denote its modern sense of possession of extra-European territories or ‘la plus grande France’ by the 1920s, though the term and its related variations

³⁶ The first conference to explore this relationship, ‘Exoticism, Colonialism and Decadence’, was held at the University of Oxford, 24-26 September 2018. See <https://exoticismcolonialismdecadence.weebly.com> [accessed 9 October 2019]

³⁷ Raoul Girardet notes that between 1851-1870, French overseas expansion was not systematically founded on a conscious and concerted political action, but it rather was a result of dispersed but multiple initiatives (*L’Idée coloniale en France de 1871 à 1962*, p. 5). For the discussion of the evolution of the concept of colonisation in France, see also Jacques Frémeaux, *Les Empires coloniaux* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, [2002] 2012), and Charles Robert Ageron, *France coloniale ou parti colonial?* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1978), pp. 27-41.

³⁸ Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 108. See also Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 11-12.

³⁹ Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. 31.

were also being used in more ambiguous ways.⁴⁰ In order to avoid the ambiguity inherent in the French understanding of the term, in my analysis I use the Marxist-inspired definition of imperialism as mainly signifying ‘capitalist colonialism’ and implying a global structure of inter-imperial rivalry. However, in line with the nineteenth-century hesitations, the writers of colonial literature and the commentators of colonialism often use ‘colonialisme’, ‘colonial’ and ‘impérialisme’, ‘impérial’ interchangeably.

While Decadence and (post)colonial scholars have to some extent mentioned the connection between Decadence and colonialism, they have only done so in the form of a passing remark or from a monolithically ideological perspective. In decadent studies, when it is mentioned at all, colonialism is often conjured up in the discussions of exoticism in decadent literature and arts. It is primarily mentioned as a historical backdrop, without further analysis.⁴¹ In the study of colonial literature, on the other hand, the critics focus on the fear of national decadence as part of the underlying rationale of the colonial endeavour. As such, any analysis often concludes that it is to fight against Decadence that writers deploy the ‘thèmes impérialistes’.⁴² While such analyses provide the ideological and psychological contexts, they overlook the role of decadent aesthetics and themes as important constitutive features in literary composition.

More broadly, the notions of decadence, along with the related terms degeneration, degeneracy and decline (to which we shall return), are often amalgamated under the medical and pathological connotations specific to the nineteenth century and examined from the

⁴⁰ Pierre Citti, ‘Empire et décadence (1880-1914)’, *Cahier SIELEC, L’Aventure coloniale*, 7 (2011), 195-228 (p. 212).

⁴¹ For instance, in the opening historical and political background, there is no mention of the French expansion overseas in Jean Pierrot, *L’Imaginaire décadent (1880-1900)* (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, [2007] 1977).

⁴² Martine Astier Loufti, *Littérature et colonialisme: l’expansion coloniale vue dans la littérature romanesque française 1871-1914* (Paris: Mouton Editeur, 1971), pp. 74-117.

perspective of racial theory, an approach that marginalises their relations with the artistic and literary spheres.⁴³

In postcolonial theory, it is a well-noted fact that the colonised is portrayed as decadent and degenerate. It is this portrayal that informs colonial domination: for example, the premise is central in Homi Bhabha's theorisation of the concept of 'ambivalence' in colonial discourse. And yet the relationship of this degeneracy to literary Decadence is overlooked, which is particularly surprising given the significance of Decadence in the colonial period.⁴⁴

The separateness of these two contemporaneous phenomena in scholarship can perhaps be partly explained by the discrepant theoretical frameworks used to envisage each. While Decadence has traditionally been seen as a Franco-British, or at best a pan-European, phenomenon, colonialism has long been examined from a transnational and comparative perspective.⁴⁵ However the resurgence of Decadence studies in recent years, happening mainly within the English departments, has increasingly situated Decadence within a global perspective, though without giving central stage to colonialism.⁴⁶ By looking at Decadence in the colonial literature of Indochina, this study aims to bridge this gap and contribute to the view of Decadence as a 'travelling aesthetic'⁴⁷ on the one hand, and on the other hand, a new approach to the study of colonial literature as one of the objects of decadent studies.

⁴³ Said in his discussion of the late nineteenth century debates about imperialism also focuses on the moral-political role of biological determinism (*Orientalism*, p. 207).

⁴⁴ 'The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.' (Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 101).

⁴⁵ One of the early formulations in France of a systematically global character of colonialism and imperialism can be found in Sartre's 1956 speech at the meeting 'Pour la paix en Algérie' (Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Le colonialisme est un système', *Les Temps Modernes* (March-April 1956).

⁴⁶ Kristin Mary Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Vincent B. Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 'The Global Circulation of the Literatures of Decadence', *Literature Compass*, 10 (2013), 70-81, and, for the cross-disciplinary global Decadence, see Michael T. Saler, *The Fin-De-Siècle World* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁴⁷ Said develops the concept of 'travelling theory' in *The World, the Text and the Critic* ((Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 226-47) to denote the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another

A notable exception in which the relations between Decadence and colonialism are approached directly, perhaps for the first time, can be found in Pierre Citti's article, 'Empire et décadence' which builds on a chapter of his much earlier book *Contre la décadence*.⁴⁸ While Citti examines the literary movements of 'régionalisme' and 'exotisme' as comparable forms of counter-Decadence in his book chapter, he focuses, in this article, on the close connection between the empire and Decadence. Exploring the historical paradigms that allowed Decadence to emerge, paradoxically, from within the positivist era of progress, he studies the literary responses to these two conjoined phenomena. Covering a wide range of literary texts written at the *fin de siècle*, Citti highlights 'des sentiments et des représentations diverses et subtiles' expressed in these texts.⁴⁹ These cannot, he argues, be unilaterally summed up as either 'un triomphalisme à l'état pur' or 'un pessimisme catastrophique intégral'. While his argument concerning the multifarious responses to colonisation represents a new direction in re-evaluating the literary texts of the colonial period, colonial literature is nonetheless relegated to the backdrop behind metropolitan anti-decadent texts and adventure fiction. As such, while Citti's article marks an important step towards critical engagement with the interpenetrating relations between what he calls the 'deux faces d'un seul mythe',⁵⁰ his analysis fails to recognise the significant ambiguities inherent in texts other than those considered to be anti-decadent, and it arguably misses the politically and aesthetically engaged dimensions of these decadent texts. *Decadent Indochina* partly sets out to fill this critical gap by focusing on the texts considered to be of the periphery and form the colonial literature of Indochina. This is a highly complex term which will be problematised and discussed in this Introduction in relation to its related term, 'exotic literature'.

which involves processes of representation and institutionalisation that are different, and often delayed, from those at the point of origin.

⁴⁸ Citti, 'Empire et décadence', 195-228, and *Contre la décadence: histoire de l'imagination française dans le roman 1890-1914* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1987), pp. 243-92.

⁴⁹ Citti, 'Empire et décadence', 195-228 (p. 228).

⁵⁰ Citti, p. 195.

THE DEFINITIONS OF DECADENCE

Since their conception by the French literary avant-garde at the end of the nineteenth century there has been much debate about the differences and overlaps between Decadence and Symbolism. Most critical work on the subject suggests that the two terms remain historically versatile, if not persistently vague, yet specific to the spirit of the *fin de siècle*. The term *fin de siècle* itself denotes both the specific historical period at the end of the nineteenth century, spanning arguably from the 1880s up to the interwar period, and the related cultural and moral 'état d'âme' characterised by 'exhaustion and decline', 'anarchy and counter-cultural activity' and subversive discourses happening primarily in France.⁵¹ The three terms are used in relation to each other and offer some mutual validation, often with one notion foregrounded against the others.⁵² The traditional view that Decadence was merely a negative reaction to naturalism and Parnassianism, 'a final twitter of Romantic neurosis', a brief transitory moment preparing the ground for the more inventive Symbolism, or even a pejorative notion associated with perverted writers, was rejected as early as the late 1970s.⁵³ This view treats the complex historical situation too reductively⁵⁴ and overlooks the long-

⁵¹ Michel Winock, *Décadence fin de siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), p. 20, and *Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin de Siècle: French and European Perspectives*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), p. 9. See also Guy Ducrey's excellent introduction to *Romans fin-de-siècle, 1890-1900*, ed. by Guy Ducrey (Paris: R. Laffont, 1999), pp. iii-iii, and Eugen Weber, *France: Fin De Siècle* (Cambridge, Mass, London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁵² For instructive discussions of these terms, see particularly *L'Esprit de décadence* (Paris: Minard, 1980), vol. 1, *Anthologie de la poésie symboliste et décadente*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001), pp. 7-29, and *Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin De Siècle*, pp. 1-15. For the sociological reading, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), pp. 440-1, though his analysis relies too complacently on the social and ideological divide between the Decadents and Symbolists.

⁵³ A. E. Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature 1830-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1958), p. vii. This traditional view was particularly promoted by Guy Michaud in *Message poétique du Symbolisme* (Paris: Nizet, 1947) before appearing in its abridged version under the title *Le Symbolisme tel qu'en lui-même* (Paris: Nizet, 1995). For the defence of Decadence, see particularly Pierrot, *L'Imaginaire décadent (1880-1900)*, pp. 13-18, and Louis Marquèze-Pouey, *Le Mouvement décadent en France* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986).

⁵⁴ The dates of reference for the two movements are Anatole Baju's magazine, *Le Décadent* launched in April 1886 and Jean Moréas's publication of 'Un manifeste littéraire' commonly known as 'le manifeste du Symbolisme' on 18 September 1886. Critics often consider these events as not marking the beginning of the avant-garde but rather as epitomising what had already existed. Writers at that time were caught up in ever-changing groupings through innumerable manifestos and periodicals, in which entente among them was only short lived, as attested by the famous interviews of contemporary writers by Jules Huret, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* (Vanves: Editions Thot, [1891] 1982). Similarly, many of the writers considered to be the figureheads of the two movements such as Mallarmé, Verlaine and Rimbaud were all at one time or another called 'Symbolist' or/and 'Decadent'.

lasting impact of decadent aesthetics and attitudes on France's literary and artistic circles as well as, as it will become clear, on the cultural and political arenas.

Broadly speaking, at the *fin de siècle*, the artistic programme and literary reflexion proposed by both movements were elaborated on the basis of common themes, such as formal innovation, originality, modernity, ambiguity, transposition between the arts and reaction against bourgeois values. However, if literary history champions Symbolism as a 'school' and foregrounds its status as a 'theory', decadent sensibility had always been looming behind as 'un terme de ralliement' and 'une prise de conscience, plus [que] la formation d'une école'.⁵⁵ Symbolism is sometimes considered to be 'primarily a set of perspectives on reading and interpretation',⁵⁶ with a neat separation, at least in its overt theoretical discourse, between the literary/artistic domain and the extra-literary, while Decadence can be said to be a 'total cultural package'.⁵⁷ Symbolism is best represented in poetry while Decadence appears mainly in novelistic form but is not limited to the artistic realm, informing and being informed by a wide range of cultural and socio-political discourses and practices. Decadence is one of the most enduring ideas of the late nineteenth century, making its way through the twentieth century with a recent resurgence as its end approaches.⁵⁸ Used in this study with a capital letter to highlight its versatile, totalising and cross-disciplinary nature, Decadence is approached through both a politico-cultural and aesthetic lens.

Etymologically, the word 'decadence' comes from the latin 'de' and 'cadere' meaning 'to fall down from'. In its politico-cultural dimension, Decadence connotes the sense of

⁵⁵ Winock, *Décadence fin de siècle*, p. 7.

⁵⁶ McGuinness, *Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin De Siècle*, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Patrick McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics in Fin de Siècle France: From Anarchism to Action Française* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). McGuinness's important study challenges this traditional apolitical view of Symbolism and explores its complex and fluctuating relationship with the extra-literary, particularly radical politics at the *fin de siècle*.

⁵⁸ For the continuation of Decadence in the twentieth century, see David April Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995). For the return of Decadence at the turn of the twentieth century, see Terry Eagleton, 'The Flight to the Real' in *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 11-21. See also Christophe Charle who warns against the overly simplistic analogy established by 'l'intellectualisme fin de siècle' of his time, *Paris fin de siècle: culture et politique* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1998), pp. 275-85.

decay and decline, as adopted from the histories of the rise and fall of civilisations. The decadence of the Roman empire was its primary model. Characterised by its cyclical ‘Éternel retour’,⁵⁹ this imperial decline is often associated with racial, cultural, socio-political, linguistic and moral decline. If the notion of Decadence has always been present in Western history, it acquired a specific and over-arching imaginary at the *fin de siècle* in connection with the rapid and radical changes Western societies were undergoing due to the forces of modernisation. Despite being linked with the ideology of progress and positivism, modernity nonetheless aroused anxiety and suspicion. Following France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, the loss of Alsace-Lorraine and the Commune, the idea that the nation was in a state of ‘crisis’ arose from perceptions of racial, economic, ethnic, demographic and political decline, as well as from the deviations from religious and gender traditions.⁶⁰ This impression of established orders ‘coming to an end’ was captured by the stock image of the sun setting, which allegorised the end of empire.⁶¹

Decadence first entered the meta-discourse as a pejorative notion that sought to theorise this politico-cultural mood. As early as 1834, Désiré Nisard in his *Études de critique et de mœurs sur les poètes latins de la décadence* compared his contemporaries, the Romantic poets, to the ‘Latins des bas empires’, formulating most of the elements that came to be associated with the later decadent movement. A similar analogy was used by Thomas de Couture’s large-

⁵⁹ Ducrey, *Romans fin-de-siècle, 1890-1900*, p. iv, and R. K. R. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p. 2.

⁶⁰ Alongside the Franco-Prussian war, there were a series of socio-political events at the *fin de siècle* that fuelled the public’s pessimism, such as the Boulangism, the Panama scandal (1891-2), anarchist attacks from the 1890s, the Dreyfus affair, and the widespread fear for syphilis. For the notion of crisis, see *Crise fin-de-siècle et tentation de l'exotisme*, ed. by Guy Ducrey and Jean-Marc Moura (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Université Charles-de-Gaulle Lille 3, 2002). Pierre Citti argues for a more nuanced analysis of the response to these historical ‘crisis’ in the form of regenerative patriotic zeal (*Contre la décadence*, pp. 48-55). For historical and cultural studies of the *fin-de-siècle* France, see for example Venita Datta, *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France. Bodies, Minds and Gender*, ed. by Christopher E. Forth and Elinor Ann Accampo (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁶¹ It was Baudelaire’s aesthetic theorisation of the ‘soleil agonisant’ in ‘Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe’ (first published in 1857 that set in motion this trope which was to be taken up by the younger generation of Decadents (*Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard ‘La Pléiade’, 1976), vol. 2, p. 320). See for example Catulle Mendès’ poem, ‘Coucher de siècle’, in *Les Braises du cendrier: nouvelles poésies* (Paris: Charpentier, 1900), pp. 85-6.

format painting, *Romains de la décadence* (1847), to offer a critique of July Monarchy France. By the second half of the century, Decadence represented an insult directed against avant-garde writers by their critics, with Baudelaire as the spiritual leader of ‘l’esthétique de la débauche’: ‘Le Baudelairisme n’est pas la littérature d’une société destinée à vivre, c’est [...] la littérature d’une génération au sang vicié et au tempérament ruiné’.⁶²

A more favourable decadent genealogy was drawn up by Paul Bourget at the end of the century to include writers and critics such as Zola, Taine, the Goncourt brothers, and Baudelaire.⁶³ As opposed to Bourget’s genealogy, however, another important denunciation of Decadence is to be found in the infamous volume written by the reactionary Austrian physician and cultural critic Max Nordau. In his *Dégénérescence*, the Decadents were seen in psycho-physical terms as the erotomaniac ‘degenerate’ who threatened cultural health and reversed the evolution of the European races.⁶⁴ Characterised by extreme fatigue, neurosis, as well as sexual and moral perversity, the Decadents were seen as symptomatic of the illness of the over-civilisation inherent in modernity. The medical diagnosis of ‘degeneration’ as a pathology was mapped onto the cultural notion of Decadence, with political and moral repercussions related to the image of a diseased Europe (for which colonisation came to be seen by many as a potential remedy). Decadence and degeneration were thus inextricably associated and mutually validated, although they remained distinct to some degree.⁶⁵

⁶² Edmond Scherer, *Études critiques sur la littérature contemporaine* (Paris: Calmann Lévy 1863-1895), vol. 8, p. 86 and 90. See also Max Nordau, who remarked that the word was used by the critics in France during the 1850s-60s to discuss Gautier and Baudelaire (*Dégénérescence* (Lausanne, Paris: L’Age d’Homme, [1894] 2010), pp. 344-5).

⁶³ Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Plon, [1883] 1920), vol. 1. This attempt to elaborate a theory of Decadence proved to have a significant impact in *fin-de-siècle* intellectual life. That Bourget’s study can be viewed as a valorisation of Decadence is attested to by the ways in which the subsequent generation, such as Anatole Baju, drew on it to insist upon the ‘fundamentally forward-looking nature of the decadent writer’ (Patrick, *Poetry and Radical Politics in Fin de Siècle France*, p. 46).

⁶⁴ Nordau, *Dégénérescence*, pp. 168-9. Originally published in German in 1892, Nordau’s work became a success throughout Europe. It was translated into English in 1895 with the title *Degeneration* and with seven printings in four months (Reinhold Heller, ‘Some Observations concerning Grim Ladies, Dominating Women, and Frightened Men around 1900’, in *The Earthly Chimera and the Femme Fatale: Fear of Woman in the Nineteenth-Century Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), pp. 7-13 (p. 9)). The French version, *Dégénérescence*, was first published in 1894.

⁶⁵ For the study of the link between the medical and cultural models, see Robert A. Nye, ‘Degeneration and the Medical Model of Cultural Crisis in the French Belle Epoque’, in *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe: Essays in*

Although there has been much scholarship on degeneration particularly in the medical humanities, there seems to be a delay in examining the intricate link between Decadence, degeneration, colonisation and literature. The pathological model of degeneration is in fact central to the decadent literature of Indochina, particularly in the representation of the colonised as racially and pathologically degenerate Decadents. However, degenerate aesthetes are to be found among the colonisers as well as the colonised, which complicates Nordau's depictions of European degeneration as a symptom of European modernity and the discourse of regeneration through colonisation, as we shall see particularly in Chapter Two when dealing with miscegenation and *métissage*.

Nordau's ideological stance was not new. The Naturalist writers had long before brought the medical language into literature. However, while reducing literature to the extra-literary, Nordau's highly imaginative and sensational theory reflected a common practice that reached its apotheosis at the end of the century when discourses from the emerging social sciences – such as race theory, social Darwinism, psychology, sexology, psychiatry – were amalgamated with those from the natural and medical sciences in such a way that the resulting eclectic mix could be readily manipulated for discussion of a wide range of social issues. As we shall see in the following chapters, emerging disciplines related to the colonies such as colonial psychology and colonial medical discourse or sexology were fed into the decadent literary discourse of Indochina. Reading colonial literature with this awareness of the decadent intellectual paradigm will thus reveal the overlooked colonial version of decadent discourse. In return, the decadent tropes and representations deployed in colonial literature will be elucidated as representing not an innocuous aesthetics, but an imbrication of ideological materials drawn from the *métropole*. However, the metropolitan materials acquire a double direction, both reflecting the metropolitan centre and diverting from it,

Honor of George L. Mosse, ed. by George L. Mosse, et al. (New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Books, 1982), pp. 19-41. For the general study of degeneration and the *fin de siècle*, see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

provoking a new set of aesthetic and thematic possibilities related to the specific location of Indochina. In some cases, decadent colonial tropes were transported back home and fed into metropolitan Decadence, as is the case of the trope of opium smoking discussed in Chapter One. 'Colonial Decadence' is to be understood as a 'travelling aesthetics' which criss-crosses the boundaries between the *métropole* and its empire.

The common feature shared by all theories and models of Decadence is that evidence of politico-cultural Decadence was mainly drawn from literature and the arts. Alongside its politico-cultural connotation, literary and artistic Decadence offered a productive, though confused, image in which the writers linked to Decadence often self-contradicted or contradicted each other. However, putting aside affiliations to the proper movement, there appears to be two veins of literary Decadence in French literature, situated in differing relationships to modernity.

The first vein has to be understood in relation to the long genealogy of Decadence itself. The Greco-Roman cyclical conception of the world gave rise to a binary opposition within which nature is the norm and civilisation a degeneracy. This theory was later epitomised in Rousseau's famous *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* at Dijon in 1750.⁶⁶ The Romantics then adopted this idea and created a new sensibility, yearning for the virtues of nature and condemning the madness of civilisation. Paradoxically, decadent sensibility emerged in a challenge to, but also in concurrence with, these Romantic values. Rejecting the Romantics' emotional sublimation of nature, the Decadents nevertheless shared their contempt for the bourgeois doctrine of progress. The Decadents' relationship with modernity, in short, was a complex one: they were at once the symptom of and reaction against it.

⁶⁶ Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature*, p. 4.

Gautier's preface to the posthumous 1868 edition of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* gives the definition of decadent style.⁶⁷ Compared with the Latin and Byzantine styles at the end of empire, Baudelaire's 'monde poétique moderne' is identified by Gautier with artificiality, mysticism, perversity, and decadence. These modern traits are presented as a supreme practice of virtues and refinement that resist the laws of nature. Baudelaire's style reflects the final stage of a society that had reached the culmination of civilisation: 'le style de décadence [...] n'est autre que l'art arrivé à ce point de maturité extrême'.⁶⁸

From Gautier's articulation of Baudelairean Decadence, artificiality and refinement are reflected in the themes of *ennui*, weariness, solipsism, pervert sexuality, morbidity, and associated with Schopenhauer and Wagner.⁶⁹ The most complete picture of this aspect of Decadence is embodied in Huysmans' Des Esseintes, the anti-hero of *À rebours* (1884). However, this novel can be read as both the bible of Decadence and its severest critique because it is laced with irony. Indeed irony, self-parody and 'l'esprit de blague' formed an inherent part of decadent aesthetics. This double posture is to be found in the publication of parodic volumes such as *Les Délivrescences, poème décadents d'Adoré Floupette* with Byzantium given as the place of publication, *Petit glossaire pour servir à l'intelligence des auteurs décadents et symbolistes* as well as the numerous groups formed in Parisian cafés and cabarets (the 'Hydropathes', 'Zutistes' et 'artistes incohérents').⁷⁰ Anti-decadent criticism of the time also noted this unconventional trait, though often reading it literally as a sign of mediocrity.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Gautier drew his thoughts from Baudelaire himself who had praised the supremacy of Decadence in the forementioned *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe (Œuvres complètes, vol. 2, pp. 319-37)*. Baudelaire's text was highly influential to the generation 1880s-1890s. On this, see Ducrey, *Romans fin-de-siècle, 1890-1900*, pp. xxi-xxiii.

⁶⁸ Théophile Gautier, 'Charles Baudelaire', in *Œuvres complètes de Charles Baudelaire* (Paris: Lévy, 1868), vol. 1, pp. 1-75 (p. 17).

⁶⁹ Michel Brix, 'L'Idéalisme fin-de-siècle', *Romantisme*, 124 (2004), 141-54, and Gerald D. Turbow, 'Art and Politics: Wagnerism in France', in *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics*, ed. by David Clay Large, William Weber, and Anne Dzamba Sessa (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 134-66.

⁷⁰ Adoré Floupette, *Les Délivrescences: poèmes décadents* ([Paris] Byzance: Lion Vanné, 1885), and Jacques Plowert, *Petit glossaire pour servir à l'intelligence des auteurs décadents et symbolistes* (Paris: Vanier, 1888). The former was written by Gabriel Vicaire et Henri Beauclair and the latter was a collaboration between Paul Adam, Jean Moréas, Gustave Khan, and Félix Fénéon.

⁷¹ See for example Edward Scherer's critique of Bourget as Baudelaire's imitator in *Études critiques sur la littérature contemporaine*, vol. 8, pp. 85-91.

Within this self-mocking posture, imitation and repetition are adopted as part of decadent literary aesthetics.⁷² This aesthetics of pastiche is to be found in the colonial literature of Indochina and has often been seen as evidence of its lack of literary quality. However, while this is true in many texts, in some of the texts under examination here, pastiche is a decadent literary strategy that destabilises the text, playing with possibilities and ambiguities in a manner that foreshadows the postcolonial concept of ‘mimicry’ as theorised by Homi Bhabha for the colonised’s creative and more subversive identificatory strategy.

The second vein of literary Decadence can also be identified in Gautier’s ‘Charles Baudelaire’. While insisting on the ‘cult of artificiality’, Gautier cleansed the term Decadence of its negative tonality and recast it as a change of state, a transition, rather than a decline. His articulation of Decadence as a modern form of art brings out originality and innovation – ‘idées neuves’, ‘formes nouvelles et mots qu’on n’a pas entendus encore’ – while embracing the aesthetics of morbidity, ‘de tenebreux, de difforme, et de vaguement horrible’, as one of the principles of artistic beauty.⁷³ It is on this more positive model of revitalisation and regeneration that the young writers of the 1880s built their movement, following the lead of Anatole Baju, and brandished Decadence paradoxically as both a symptom and solution to modernity.⁷⁴ Although many critics argued that Decadence, particularly in France, became more pessimistic after this initial movement,⁷⁵ this positive strand was to endure in the forms of transgression and opposition against bourgeois and mainstream norms.

Decadent Indochina proposes to study the ways in which metropolitan literary and cultural Decadence in all its aspects is adapted and localised by the French authors in the

⁷² On imitation and other main features of the decadent style, see James M. Smith, ‘Concepts of Decadence in Nineteenth-Century French Literature’, *Studies in Philology*, 50 (1953), 640-51.

⁷³ Gautier, ‘Charles Baudelaire’, p. 17.

⁷⁴ Anatole Baju soon attempted at coining another term to divert from the pejorative connotation Decadence was still associated with. The new term ‘le décadisme’ was praised by Verlaine, with reference to *À rebours*, as representing ‘une littérature éclatant par un temps de décadence, non pour marcher dans le pas de son époque, mais pour s’insurger contre.’ (Verlaine, lettre au décadent, 1-15 janvier, 1888).

⁷⁵ See for example McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics in Fin de Siècle France*, p. 34.

colonial context of Indochina, and how decadent styles and attitudes are deflected by colonisation. It explores the destabilising role ‘colonial Decadence’ plays at the heart of the colonial contact and in the apparent confidence in European self-identity and its domination over Indochina.

WORLD HISTORY AND ORIENTALISM

Like its relationship with modernity, Decadence’s relationship with colonisation is complex. This can best be understood in the *fin-de-siècle* perspective on history. Alongside the cyclical temporality of the rise and fall of civilisations, Hegel’s philosophy of history became prominent particularly at the time of European expansion and fed into both colonial and decadent discourses concerning extra-European societies.⁷⁶ Hegel posits the progression of history driven by the World Spirit or ‘Weltgeist’ moving from the East to the West. Seen as the beginning of history, the ‘Oriental world’ (China, India, Persia and the Nile valley) gradually fell into decline as the centre moved westwards to Western Europe, which was seen as the acme of progress and civilisation as attested by the modern European state.

The Hegelian philosophical postulation prefigured the racialised hierarchy of civilisations which racist commentators drew partly from Arthur de Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853).⁷⁷ The World-History view offered a theoretical framework that consolidated the West’s imperial imaginary of the East as decadent. The sense of ‘belatedness’ ubiquitous in decadent writings embodies this intersection between Decadence and Hegelian World History. The idea of arriving too late in a world that was too old, already

⁷⁶ Hegel developed this view in a series of lectures delivered in the 1820s. They were published posthumously in 1837 with several ensuing editions and compilations. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004). For the discussion of Hegel’s World History and Asia, see in particular Jean-Marc Moura, ‘L’(Extrême)-Orient selon G. W. F. Hegel: Philosophie de l’histoire et imaginaire exotique’, *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 1 (2001), 31-42. See also Andrew Sartori, ‘Hegel, Marx, and World History’, in *A Companion to Global Historical Thought*, ed. by Prasenjit Duara, Viren Murthy, and Andrew Sartori (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp. 197-212.

⁷⁷ Gobineau, ironically, doesn’t argue so much for racial hierarchy as degeneration through racial mixing which he sees inevitable and historical. See Robert Young’s discussion of Gobineau’s ambivalent attitude towards racial admixture as simultaneously degenerative and regenerative in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*, pp. 99-109.

present in metropolitan decadent texts, becomes accentuated in many colonial texts where the exoticism of the colony is revealed to be deceptively familiar and clichéd.⁷⁸ This disillusionment has Romantic roots. It is however intensified by decadent aestheticism and the posture of the degenerate aesthete, generating an ambiguous stance *vis-à-vis* the colonialist discourse which promotes the colony as anti-decadent and regenerative. Indochinese decadent writing reflects this sense of belatedness while opening up alternative forms of identity and identification, epistemologically and politically as we shall see. Belatedness can also be linked to the decadent style of repetition and imitation privileged by many decadent writers. Gustave Flaubert can be seen as the first who systematically experimented with the links between the Orient, belatedness and the writing style of repetition – the already said, the already published – particularly in his orientalist text, *Salammbô*.⁷⁹ Indeed, alongside Baudelaire, Gautier, and Huysmans, Flaubert and his exotic orientalism are highly important influences on the decadent literature of Indochina particularly for the themes of opium in Chapter One and the *femme fatale* in Chapter Two.

Indochina, with its geographical and cultural situation between two ancient civilisations, the Indian and the Chinese, was to some extent seen with respect due to its ancient traditions and cultures.⁸⁰ Within the context of the rise in popularity of philology and comparative linguistics in Europe, the phenomenon dubbed the ‘Renaissance orientale’ by Edgar Quinet and later Raymond Schwab⁸¹ resulted in new enthusiasm in Orientalist

⁷⁸ Said notes that the scholars of the Romantic period such as Harold Bloom and W. J. Bate have argued that the Orient created anxiety, belatedness and sense of inferiority in Romantic writings; a view Said puts in contrast to that of Raymond Schwab who sees the Orient as positive influence and enrichment (*The World, the Text, and the Critic*, pp. 250-1).

⁷⁹ Bernheimer argues that Flaubert’s influence on decadent writers resides specifically in ‘a certain attitude to history’ linked to belatedness and that this attitude is fundamental to his idea of Decadence (*Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 33-55).

⁸⁰ This is most striking in comparison with other colonies, particularly sub-Saharan Africa. ‘Africa proper’ was seen by Hegel as ‘the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night’ and the African ‘exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state’. In contrast, North Africa, i.e. today’s Maghreb, was seen as looking ‘Europe-wards’ particularly due to French colonisation. (Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 91 and 93).

⁸¹ Raymond Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale: la découverte du sanscrit, le siècle des écritures déchiffrées* (Paris: Payot, 1950), see also Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London; New York:

scholarship on Far East Asian spirituality. This conjecture contributed to France's positive view of her only Asian colony, with which it desired to rival the British colony of India.⁸² Thus, alongside the Orientalist-cum-decadent cliché of the perversely mystical Orient, Indochina was celebrated as the land where the knowledge of how to resist the decaying forces of modernity could be found, as we shall see particularly in Chapter Three. At the intersection of decadent, colonial and Orientalist discourses, the Indochinese people were seen at once as decadent and primitive, over-civilised and uncivilised, degenerate yet wise. In response to this view of the colonised Indochinese, the French coloniser coming from decadent Europe often finds himself in an ambivalent position: either he is a Decadent succumbing to Indochinese Decadence or he takes on an anti-decadent stance with the aim of regenerating both himself and the colonised in tune with the colonial ideology of the 'mission civilisatrice'. But either way, the allure of Decadence often looms behind.

THE *FIN-DE-SIÈCLE* INDOCHINA: COLONIAL HISTORY AND LITERARY PRODUCTIONS

'L'Indochine française' as it came to be popularly known at the turn of the century is a French invention.⁸³ Historically, the hyphenated term *Indo-chine* was coined around 1837. Its later welding together as one word symbolically signified its complete adoption by the French popular imagination.⁸⁴ Established as an administrative unity in almost exactly the same year as the publication of the first decadent journal and Symbolist manifesto, the 'Union

Routledge, 1999), Roger-Pol Droit, *Le Culte du néant: les philosophes et le Bouddha* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, [1997] 2004), and Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western culture* (London: Aquarian, 1994).

⁸² France lost her major colonies in India (and North America) at the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763. On imperial rivalries, see Kate Marsh, *Narratives of the French Empire: Fiction, Nostalgia, and Imperial Rivalries, 1784 to the present* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013).

⁸³ Cooper, *France in Indochina*, p. 2. However, prominent historians of Indochina argue for a more nuanced view that French Indochina was the result of territorial and political reorganisation following the diminishing influence of the traditionalist Chinese Empire. See particularly Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochine: la colonisation ambiguë*, p. 13.

⁸⁴ For the study of the term 'Indo-Chine', see Pierre Le Roux, 'Avec ou sans trait d'union, note sur le terme "l'Indo-Chine"', *Cahiers des Sciences humaines*, 32 (1996), 511-30.

indochinoise' in 1887 grouped five dissimilar territories: the colony of Cochinchina and the four protectorates of Annam, Tonkin, Cambodia and Laos.

Although official French presence in Southeast Asia dates back to the sixteenth century, France's imperial intervention actively began in the 1850s under the pretext of protecting the Catholic missions. The Cambodian King signed a protectorate treaty with France in 1863 against aggression from Siam (today's Thailand). Cochinchina (where the city of Saigon is located) became a French colony in 1865 and Annam (with the imperial capital of Hue) was put under French protection in 1874.⁸⁵ The protectorate of Tonkin was officially established in 1883 with the Harmand treaty, and it was here that the French struggled the most to assert their dominion. Tonkin, with its geographical position bordering China, represented an important geo-political stake for China and the European powers, particularly the French and British who were competing to open a new route to the Middle Empire via Yunnan. Against the imperial troops of the emperor of Annam supported by the Chinese emperor, the Tonkin war, known euphemistically as the 'pacification of Tonkin', officially lasted from 1883-1885, though it unofficially continued until 1891 (the year Jules Huret published his famous survey on literary debates in which Decadence occupied a prominent place).⁸⁶ Commonly considered to be the father of the French republican principle of 'laïcité', Jules Ferry was also known to be one of the main instigators, along with Gambetta, of the more aggressive politics of expansion.⁸⁷ At a time when France's main preoccupation was

⁸⁵ The term 'Annam' (meaning 'Pacified South' in Chinese) was often used during the colonial period to refer to all three territories – Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin – which formed the eastern parts of the Peninsula making up modern-day Vietnam. The related term 'Annamite' refers to the specific group from Annam as opposed to the *Tonkinois* from Tonkin, or, more generally to designate the principal ethnic group, the Viet, from all the three eastern parts of the Peninsula. In the texts studied here, the term *Annamite* is interchangeably used by colonial writers to refer to both meanings. For a detailed discussion of various historical names referring to today's Vietnam and their connotations, see Christopher E. Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), pp. xxiii-xxv.

⁸⁶ Allain Quella-Villéger even gives the year 1897 with the arrival of Paul Doumer to be the end of the pacification (*Indochine: un rêve d'Asie*, p. iii). Robson and Yee mentions that in some areas conflict continued after the first World War (p. 4).

⁸⁷ For the studies of political decisions to conquer Indochina, see Jean-Paul Bertaud and William Serman, *Nouvelle histoire militaire de France 1789-1919* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), pp. 631-55, and Brocheux and Hémy, *Indochine: la colonisation ambiguë*, pp. 25-74.

seeking revenge against Germany for its loss of Alsace and Lorraine, his support for the Tonkin war gave rise to vitriolic parliamentary debates and the fall of Ferry's government; he was nicknamed the 'Tonkinois'. Laos was the last area to be annexed as a protectorate in 1893.

The 1880s are often known as the 'heroic period' of French Indochina. Alongside writings by missionaries and expeditioners, it is during this period that French metropolitan writers such as Pierre Loti reported on the war. One of the first literary writings of this period, if not *the* first of French Indochina, *L'Opium* (1886), was written by Paul Bonnetain who was a reporter as well as novelist. Although drawing on Naturalism, this novel marks a transition towards Decadence and laid the ground for some of the Indochinese tropes, particularly that of opium and its destructive influence on the coloniser examined in Chapter One.

Around the turn of the century, the pacification was gradually replaced by a policy of 'mise en valeur' under General Governor Paul Doumer (from 1897-1902), with a centralised administrative system organised around Hanoi.⁸⁸ Despite the protectorate status of the four territories, Indochina as a whole was given full colonial rule. Colonisation and its ensuing policy of modernisation propelled Indochina into modernity marked by globalisation and inter-imperial rivalries. Literary production during this period is imbued with the awareness of Indochina's emergence into the modern and globalised world. In Claude Farrère's *Les Civilisés* (1905), notably, three over-civilised Frenchmen evolve within the newly modernised capital of Cochinchina, Saigon; other modern, colonial Asian spaces such as Hong Kong and Japan are also present in the novelistic universe. At the same time, this period saw the emergence of short stories and novels reminiscent of the recent wars of

⁸⁸ On the economic and infrastructural aspects of this *mise en valeur*, see Fourniau, *Vietnam. Domination coloniale et résistance nationale*, pp. 585-661, and for the cultural aspect, see Cooper, *France in Indochina*, pp. 10-63. For the critical study of education and the *mission civilisatrice*, see Marie-Paule Ha, 'From "Nos Ancêtres, les Gaulois" to "Leur Culture Ancestrale": Symbolic Violence and the Politics of Colonial Schooling in Indochina', *French Colonial History*, 3 (2003), 101-17. The capital was moved from Saigon to Hanoi in 1902.

pacification. Two significant figures emerged: Jules Boissière and Albert de Pouvourville. In their writings, a set of truly Indochinese tropes and ‘types’ were developed and consolidated through the use of decadent aesthetics such as opium, Indochinese tropical nature, the mandarin (the sage), the pirate, the *congai* (the concubine), and the ‘petit soldat’ among others. Both writers linked these tropes to the context of violent wars of expansion while initiating narratives that adopt the point of view of the native, which was unusual in contrast to what could be read in contemporary writing about other French colonies. Their novels and short stories were written with a sensibility and nuances that contrast with simplistic pro-colonial views, thus establishing a colonial strand of Decadence marked by critical distance *vis-à-vis* colonial discourse.

One of the recurrent figures in this fiction is arguably the ‘pirate’. If this figure is reminiscent of the genre of adventure fiction from which colonial literature derived, he acquired a specifically political signification in Indochina. In official colonial discourse, the pirate derogatively referred to the Chinese warlords and smugglers, particularly of contraband opium, who occupied the frontier territory between Tonkin and Yunnan. During the pacification, French soldiers were mainly fighting such pirates. In fact, the French used the term to label both nationalist partisans and actual bandits.⁸⁹ The recurrent pirate figure testifies to the presence of Vietnamese anti-colonialism that the colonisers tried to conceal under linguistic camouflage. In both Boissière’s and Pouvourville’s writings, the pirate is treated at times, in accordance with imperialist discourse, as a Chinese bandit. However, elsewhere he becomes problematic and ambiguous as he represents oppositional forces from within Indochina.

At the same time, the pirate’s presence also betrays the significant role opium played in the region’s geopolitics and economy. The French coloniser would soon use opium to

⁸⁹ Within this broad umbrella term, ‘pirate’, there were different factions as we shall see in Chapter One. For the study of the local context during the ‘heroic’ period, see Ella S. Laffey, ‘French Adventurers and Chinese Bandits in Tonkin: The Garnier Affair in Its Local Context’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 6 (1975), 38-51.

consolidate its power in the colony, as will be discussed in Chapter One. Lastly, the figure of the pirate points to the fundamentally multi-ethnic character of Indochinese societies. Alongside the pirate, the Chinese reappear in colonial literature of Indochina as businessmen, coolies, opium smokers or sellers.⁹⁰ The most famous area known for its Sino-Indochinese inhabitants was the buzzing Chinese quarter of Saigon, Cholon, which figures in most fictions set in Saigon. Despite this ubiquity, the Chinese presence in Indochina has often been overlooked in critical works.⁹¹ Yet it is not only part of a complex colonial reality, it also illuminates the twentieth-century patterns of Chinese immigration to France already mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction. Multi-ethnic Indochina also includes the presence of other ethnic minorities and populations, particularly the *Thôls* in the high mountains of Tonkin, often portrayed as primitive due to their tribal culture, and the Laotians and the Cambodians who are generally seen with more sympathy than the Annamites. Colonial literature plays with contrasting stereotypical representations of these populations.

This period, from the turn of the century until the 1930s, was when the bourgeois rule was consolidated and it is also when Indochina saw the emergence of a vibrant literary and intellectual culture.⁹² After Boissière and Pouvourville (the first died prematurely due to malaria in Indochina in 1897, but the latter continued to write throughout the first half of the twentieth century) emerged writers like Émile Nolly, Claude Farrère, as well as female

⁹⁰ The most memorable figure of the Sino-Indochinese is undoubtedly the narrator's wealthy titular 'lover' in Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* (1984).

⁹¹ Marie-Paule Ha's comparative study of the cultural practices of the Chinese and the French in Indochina is one of a few studies on this topic. See her chapter, 'The Chinese and the White Man's Burden in Indochina', in *China Abroad: Travels, Subjects, Spaces*, ed. by Elaine Yee Lin Ho, Julia Kuehn, and Rey Chow (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2009), pp. 191-207. Another study that gives a special mention to the Chinese community in Cholon during the colonial time is Annette Miae Kim, *Sidewalk City: Remapping Public Spaces in Ho Chi Minh City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 29-55.

⁹² There are different propositions for the periodisation of French Indochina in relation to literary production. All retain however a common view that the 1920s saw the beginning of dissident voices which were increasingly foregrounded in the 1930s. Alain Quella-Villéger for example proposes three periods: the heroic period from 1890s to 1913, the bourgeois period from 1918 to 1935, the beginning of instability until decolonisation in 1954 (*Indochine: un rêve d'Asie*, pp. i-ix.).

writers and travellers such as Myriam Harry, Clotilde Chivas-Baron and Jeanne Leuba. It was also during this period that the most famous travel writing dedicated to Indochina was published by Pierre Loti. *Un Pèlerin d'Angkor* (1912) recounts his visit to the ancient Khmer city in 1901, reflecting the deep fascination this archaeological site exerted on the metropolitan imagination.⁹³ Alongside other Indochinese tropes mostly linked to the Vietnamese territories of Indochina mentioned earlier, Angkor Wat with its Khmer female dancers formed one of the most enduring tropes associated with Indochina in the French public's imagination. This is thanks to literary depictions and, perhaps more importantly, plaster casts and the replicas of the complex exhibited at various *Expositions* in the *métropole* since the 1870s following its 'discovery' by the French adventurer Henri Mouhot in 1863. The culmination of this trend was the life-size replica of the main temple at the 1931 *Exposition coloniale internationale* in Paris where it was presented as the symbol of one of the greatest achievements of the French Empire. French archaeological excavations and restorations represented not only the work of the *mission civilisatrice* in the colony, but also, for the metropolitan public, a perfect story about the regeneration of bygone civilisations undertaken through France's colonial and archaeological works.⁹⁴ The 1931 simulacrum of Angkor Wat thus symbolises the perfect embodiment of anti-decadent aesthetics. The making of the myth of this ancient Khmer ruin will be discussed in Chapter Three

In colonial literature, the Khmer temple prompted a rewriting of world history tinted with local fables and folklore in tune with *fin-de-siècle* interests in ethnography. I suggest a re-reading of this World-History-cum-ethnographic narrative inspired by the ruins as a 'metahistory'. 'Metahistory' is a term employed by Hayden White in his study of nineteenth-century historians like Ranke, Burckhardt, Michelet and Tocqueville, as a theoretical concept

⁹³ This fascination found full articulation in André Malraux's semi-autobiographical novel, *La Voie royale* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, [1930] 1992).

⁹⁴ Originally the *Mission archéologique permanente de l'Indochine* founded by Paul Doumer, the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) was founded in 1900 in Saigon before moving to Hanoi in 1902.

for examining historical consciousness or ‘the deep structure of the historical imagination of Nineteenth-century Europe’.⁹⁵ While White focuses on the narrative structure, rhetorical tools and the ideological implications embedded in history writing, my use of ‘metahistory’ follows David Harvey’s redefinition of the term in his study of the *fin-de-siècle* French occultists. In vogue among *fin-de-siècle* occultist writings, historical writings that adopted a teleological perspective with France at the centre of world spiritual history will be mapped onto the colonial narrative that recounted the rejuvenation of the ancient civilisations of Indochina thanks to French colonisation. These colonialist narratives of the ruins nonetheless wallow in Decadence in such a way that the resulting aestheticism often provokes conflicting feelings, destabilising the identity of the white adventurer as we shall see in Chapter Three.

Compared to Annam and Cambodia, Laos has a smaller literary profile. Often represented as a peaceful Edenic land marked by sensuality and simplicity similar to Gauguin’s Tahiti, Laos inspires a limited number of writings partly due to its geographical remoteness from the centres of Indochina. It is portrayed as the land of ‘décivilisation’ *par excellence* as illustrated by Jean Ajalbert in *Sao Van Di* (1905) and Gaston Starbach and Antonin Baudenne’s *Sao Tiampa, épouse laotienne* (1912). The *décivilisé* type – often a petty French soldier or administrator who has lived in a remote area for so long that he ‘goes native’ and loses contact with French civilisation – forms a recurrent theme in colonial literature. However, this stereotype is often treated either too naively as a colonial caricature, and not in the decadent vein.⁹⁶ Only the *décivilisé* aesthete, as portrayed by Jules Boissière, will thus be examined in this study in Chapter One.

⁹⁵ Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 2.

⁹⁶ This caricature of the *décivilisé* can be found in Jean Ajalbert’s *Raffin Su Su* (1911) and Pierre Mille’s character Barnavaux in a series of short stories published in 1907, *Barnavaux et quelques femmes*, which relates Barnavaux’s journey to Madagascar, Africa and Tonkin. The belittlement of the *colon* often leads to a questioning of the legitimacy of the colonial enterprise; see Copin, *L’Indochine des romans*, pp. 64-71.

Alongside novels, short stories and travel writing, poetry was also a favoured genre among the French writers. Although there exists a relatively large corpus, they remain up until now marginal in critical works, mainly due to their scattered state.⁹⁷ This study will discuss some of the poems that present the decadent themes under examination, some of them published in colonial Indochinese journals of the time. Writers from different backgrounds and generations found a common platform in these literary reviews, and it is here that the desire to construct a hybrid identity called the ‘cercle des Français d’Asie’ was expressed. As early as 1909, this group appears as the main instigator for the republication of Jules Boissière’s *Fumeurs d’opium*.⁹⁸ Following Pouvoirville’s foundation of the circle in Paris in 1909, there emerged a number of literary reviews published in Indochina that contributed to consolidate Franco-Asian identity, despite Pouvoirville’s recommendation to seek publication only among the metropolitan press and periodicals.⁹⁹ In particular, this includes *La Revue indochinoise* (1893-1925), *Les Pages indochinoises* (1912-1926), *La Plume indochinoise* (1912-1913) and *La Nouvelle revue indochinoise* (1936-1940).¹⁰⁰ To date, the study of these printing and publishing activities in Indochina as well as that of literary writings published in these journals remain to be undertaken. Nowhere else in the French empire was there a comparable desire for a hybrid colonial identity as closely tied to literary and intellectual culture as among the *Français d’Asie* in Indochina.

⁹⁷ Alongside monographs, many poems were published in periodicals. The only long study of poetry is Patrick Laude, *Exotisme indochinois et poésie. Étude sur l’œuvre poétique d’Alfred Droin, Jeanne Leuba et Albert de Pouvoirville* (Paris: Sudestasie, 1990).

⁹⁸ Thérèse Boissière addressed her gratitude to Jean Ajalbert and the *Français d’Asie* for their encouragement to re-publish her late husband’s short stories in the ‘lettre-préface’ dated from November 1909. This letter is included in the Louis Michaud reedition of *Fumeurs d’opium*, published *sine anno* for which the catalogue of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* gives the date of 1910. The reedition of Boissière’s short stories and the wider promotion of his work form part of the *Français d’Asie*’s early propagandist effort.

⁹⁹ For the origin of the foundation of the *Français d’Asie* as well as its mode of action, see Vladimir Kapor, ‘A Displaced Associationism: *Les Français d’Asie* (1890-1914) and the Location of an ‘Franco-Asian’ Colonial Culture’, paper presented at the conference *the Sixteenth Annual Conference of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes* (Newcastle University, 9-11 April 2018). I would like to express my gratitude to the author for sharing his paper in progress with me and for bringing into my attention Pouvoirville’s prescription for the *Français d’Asie* to be mainly published in the *métropole* (Albert de Pouvoirville, ‘Les Français d’Asie’, *La Dépêche coloniale illustrée* (31 July 1909), 179-89 (p. 185)).

¹⁰⁰ Except *La Nouvelle revue indochinoise* which was published in Saigon, the others were published in Hanoi.

It is also during the 1910s that the first Vietnamese Francophone writers emerged. The first volume of poetry by Nguyen Van Xiem, *Mes heures perdues*, and a collection of tales, Le Van Phat's *Contes et légendes du pays d'Annam*, were published in 1913. Following these trailblazers, a diverse body of material was published by writers such as Pham Quynh, Nguyen Tien Lang and Pham Duy Khiem.¹⁰¹ Since it exceeds the scope of our study, Vietnamese Francophone literature will not be discussed.

At the same time that the *métropole* was celebrating Indochina in the Paris *Exposition coloniale internationale* as its 'Belle Colonie', signs of dissidence and anti-colonialism that began in the late 1920s broke out into heated tension, public revolts, mutinies and anti-colonialist movements from both sides, the native and the French.¹⁰² This is particularly marked by the Yen Bay uprising in 1930 undertaken by Vietnamese soldiers in the French colonial army, the foundation of the Vietnamese Communist party in 1931 by Nguyen Ai Quoc (better known by his later pseudonym, Ho Chi Minh), and, not least, the publication in 1935 of *Indochine S.O.S* by the French journalist-activist Andrée Viollis denouncing injustice and exploitation in Indochina. It is within the metropolitan context of antifascism, anti-war and anti-imperialism promoted by the French Communist Party that the Surrealists published their manifesto against the *Exposition coloniale* and organised a counter exhibition (without much public success in comparison: 2,500 visitors as opposed to the eight million visitors of

¹⁰¹ For the studies of Vietnamese Francophone literature, apart from the studies mentioned earlier, see also Van Quang Pham, 'Les éléments de témoignage et d'identité dans les récits d'auteurs vietnamiens', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 21 (2018), 131-41, Lise-Hélène Trouilloud, 'The Genesis of Vietnamese Literature Written in French: 1920-1942', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 10 (2006), 141-48, Marie-Paule Ha, 'Theme of Exil in Indochinese Return Narratives', *Mots pluriels*, 17 (2001), and Alain Guillemin, 'La Littérature vietnamienne francophone entre colonialisme et nationalisme', in *Littératures et temps colonial: métamorphoses du regard sur la Méditerranée et l'Afrique*, ed. by Jean-Robert Henry, Lucienne Martini (Aix-en-Provence: Édisud, 1999), pp. 267-79. For the study of the publication network, see Van Quang Pham, 'Trajectoires éditoriales de la littérature francophone Vietnamienne', *Alternative Francophone*, 1 (2011), 1-14.

¹⁰² For the study of the development of Indochinese anti-French movements, see Brocheux and Hémerly, *Indochine: la colonisation ambiguë*, pp. 275-323.

the exposition).¹⁰³ After the Second World War, a new orientation in literature inspired by Indochina was led particularly by the writings of Marguerite Duras and Jean Hougron.

The years between 1880s to 1920s constitute the focus of this study because they correspond to the period when the decadent movement emerged and declined, though arguably it was appropriated by the Surrealists in the 1930s. The 1920s were marked by the end of the early literature of Indochina that bore decadent influence, as well as political changes in Indochina, namely the beginning of anti-colonial and nationalist movements.

COLONIAL OR EXOTIC LITERATURE?

The term ‘colonial literature’ used to define the texts under examination here is the subject of much discussion, not least in relation to its pendant, ‘exotic literature’. Exoticism is part of a long tradition in French literature and is associated particularly with nineteenth-century Romanticism. In contrast, colonial literature emerged in critical discourse in the early twentieth century as part of an attempt to theorise contemporary literature in relation to the empire. Colonial literature was thus associated with pro-colonialist agendas by its early theorists. Seen as reflecting the realities of the colonised land and associated with Realism, it was often contrasted with exotic literature, or exoticism ‘à la pacotille’, embodied in Pierre Loti’s writings.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ For the study of metropolitan response to anti-colonial discourse in Indochina during this period, see Cooper, *France in Indochina*, pp. 91-107. For the Surrealist counter-exhibition, see Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina*, pp. 52-71.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Forsdick notes that colonial literature was theorised with a centralisation on ‘their would-be “post-exoticism” status’ (‘Travelling Concepts: Postcolonial Approaches to Exoticism’, *Paragraph*, 24 (2001), 12-29 (p. 16)). For an overview of the early twentieth-century theory of colonial literature, see Copin, *L’Indochine dans la littérature française* pp. 28-70. The Parisian publishing house, L’Harmattan, has been re-publishing this set of colonial theory with excellent introductions written by prominent critics. See Louis Cario and Charles Régismanset, *L’Exotisme: la littérature coloniale* (Paris: L’Harmattan, [1911] 2016), Marius-Ary Leblond, *Écrits sur la littérature coloniale* (Paris: L’Harmattan, [1902-1944] 2012), Eugène Pujarniscle, *Philoxène ou la littérature coloniale en France* (Paris: L’Harmattan, [1931] 2010), and Pierre Mille, *Barnavaux aux colonies: suivi d’écrits sur la littérature coloniale* (Paris: L’Harmattan, [1906 and 1908] 2002).

However, the neat boundary between the two categories has been challenged and revisited by critics since the 1960s.¹⁰⁵ Discrepancies between this early theoretical discourse and the realities of colonial literature have been pointed out, particularly in relation to the narrowly generic opposition between Romantic/fantastic exoticism and Realist colonialism.¹⁰⁶ Alternative terms for and ways of categorising literature produced during the colonial period have been proposed to account for this discrepancy.¹⁰⁷ In the wake of decolonisation, for many, exoticism came to be pejoratively conflated with colonialism as connoting Eurocentrism and dehumanisation. However, colonial literature resurfaced as a useful category with the recent theoretical renewal from the 1980s prompted by the emergence of postcolonial studies. Concomittantly, exoticism has also been rehabilitated and reclaimed as a way to account for cultural diversity in the apparently homogenised globalised world.¹⁰⁸

For our purposes, the category ‘colonial literature’ will be more useful since it foregrounds both the geography and historicity of the texts under examination. Colonial literature *of* Indochina here refers to literature produced during the colonial period and territorially focused on the French colonies in Southeast Asia. What is discoverable in these texts is thus, primarily, France’s imaginary of Indochina as well as her self-representation,

¹⁰⁵ For the historical development of colonial literature in critical discourse, see Bernard Mouralis, ‘Pourquoi étudier les littératures coloniales?’ in *Littérature et colonies*, ed. by Jean-François Durand and Jean Sévry (Paris: Kailash, 2003), pp. 15-26.

¹⁰⁶ Jean-Marc Moura, ‘Littérature coloniale et exotisme: examen d’une opposition de la théorie littéraire coloniale’, in *Regards sur les littératures coloniales* (Paris: L’Harmattan ‘Afrique francophone: découvertes’, 1999), vol. 1, pp. 21-39, and Jennifer Yee, *The Colonial Comedy: Imperialism in the French Realist Novel* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 11-13.

¹⁰⁷ Chris Bongie proposes to distinguish between ‘imperialist exoticism’ and ‘exoticising exoticism’. While the first affirms the hegemony of the modern industrial world, the latter valorises the exotic as a refuge from modernity (*Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 16-17). Jean-François Durand suggests the categories of ‘littérature d’Empire’ and ‘littérature coloniale’. The first is valorised by its transnational and decentred sensibility (akin to Victor Segalen’s notion of ‘le Divers’), whereas the second is tied to territorial and cultural control, the desire to fix differences and colonial agenda (‘Littératures coloniales, littérature d’Empire?’, in *Société Internationale d’Étude des Littératures de l’Ère Coloniale*, <http://www.sielec.net/pages_site/ANALYSES/durand_litteratures_coloniales_litt%EA9ratures_d_empires.htm> [accessed 9 October 2019]).

¹⁰⁸ For a discussion of the challenges presented by exoticism to postcolonial criticism, see particularly the Introduction and Chapter One in Charles Forsdick, *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Cultures* (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 1-50.

both closely connected with an increasing globalised world and colonial modernity. As such, what I term the colonial literature of Indochina includes literary texts and travel writing produced by the *colons* who resided in Indochina for varying lengths of time, as well as those produced by the writers from outside of Indochina. All these authors were inspired by Indochina and sought to capture the experience of Franco-Indochinese intercultural exchanges within the context of colonisation and the emerging world system. The question of the geographical boundaries of this corpus – inside or outside of Indochina, of the centre or periphery – becomes even more problematic when one considers the inherently criss-crossing network of publication, distribution and recognition of these texts. Alongside texts published in Saigon and Hanoi (notably those of Jeanne Leuba and René Crayssac), many authors whose writings form the corpus of the colonial literature of Indochina (such as Paul Bonnetain, Jules Boissière, Albert de Pouvourville, Claude Farrère, Myriam Harry, Clotilde Chivas-Baron, and Alfred Droin to name only a few) predominantly published their writings with metropolitan publishers, such as Louis-Michaud, G. Charpentier, Flammarion, P. Ollendorff, and Calmann-Lévy. As for the network of distribution, it is difficult to precisely assess the impact on French and Indochinese readerships, but the range of circulation is suggested by various reviews published in Parisian avant-garde literary journals (*Mercure de France*, *La Revue blanche*) as well as metropolitan colonial publications (*La Dépêche coloniale illustrée*). Several of authors were part of what Vladimir Kapor terms a ‘pseudo-diasporic’ colonial network after they returned to the *métropole*. They published in both metropolitan and Indochinese journals, to keep the memory of Indochina alive for the metropolitan public while consolidating the transnational *Français d’Asie* identity project based in both locations (this point will be discussed in length in Chapter Three).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Kapor, ‘A Displaced Associationism’.

Generically, colonial literature is to be understood in its broader sense, as a *potpourri* embracing heterogeneous elements, genres, currents and modes of narration. *Fin-de-siècle* colonial texts amalgamate elements from a wide range of aesthetic and stylistic movements. And while colonial literature is a historical genre inherently linked to colonisation, exoticism points towards a different set of attitudes and an aesthetic attitude that co-exists with and permeates colonial texts while also transcending them.¹¹⁰ In colonial literature, orientalist exoticism resurfaces particularly in the trope of the impenetrable Other; as we shall see, the decadent rewriting of this trope redefines and problematises its relation to colonial ideology. This decadent redefinition, at the time when radical otherness (one of the early meanings of the exotic)¹¹¹ was regretted by many as progressively eroded by colonialism, tourism and modernity, opens up the potential for reflexivity and contestation within both exoticism and colonial literature. Victor Segalen's reassessment of exoticism in the concept of 'le Divers' developed in his unfinished notes towards an *Essai sur l'exotisme* will be of value for our analysis of exoticism in colonial literature.¹¹² 'Le Divers' is theorised as a fundamentally ethical attitude towards racial and cultural differences, for it posits an epistemological resistance against the containment of the Other within the traditional exoticist framework. 'Le Divers' is thus a premise for cultural diversity and resistance against globalisation and homogenisation. I wish to suggest that for the *fin-de-siècle* colonial literature of Indochina, it is the presence of Decadence, specifically 'critical Decadence', that constitutes this ethical oppositional potential.

¹¹⁰ For the historical development of exoticism in French literature and its potential for self-awareness, see Jennifer Yee, 'Exoticism and Colonialism', in *The Cambridge Companion to French Literature*, ed. by John D. Lyons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 151-67.

¹¹¹ On the discussion of the meanings of 'exotique' in French, see Jean-Marc Moura, *La Littérature des lointains: histoire de l'exotisme européen au XXe siècle* (Paris: H. Champion, 1998), pp. 23-24, and, for a general discussion of the nineteenth-century exoticism, see Vladimir Kapor, *Pour une poétique de l'écriture exotique: les stratégies de l'écriture exotique dans les lettres françaises aux alentours de 1850* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007).

¹¹² Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme: une esthétique du divers* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1978).

The three chapters forming *Decadent Indochina* are thematically drawn from the three recurrent decadent tropes, namely opium, sexuality and mysticism. The opium den is one of the first images associated with Indochina and the Far East in the mind of the *fin-de-siècle* French. The first Chapter proposes to sketch out a typology of the Indochinese opium theme through Paul Bonnetain, Jules Boissière and Claude Farrère's fictions of opium while analysing the links between opium in French literature and the colonisation of Indochina along with the colonial (and contraband) opium trade and consumption. The second chapter outlines an erotic cartography of French Indochina by examining three decadent types: the *femme fatale*, the androgynous man, and the homosexual. The fear and attraction of the 'néant' approached through the trope of the Buddha's ironic smile and the ruins of Angkor will be the main focus of the last chapter which aims to explore the allure of Indochinese mysticism in light of *fin-de-siècle* occult revival, the concept of world religions, imperial archaeological projects and exotic dilettantism. While three authors can be systematically identified in Chapter One, the subsequent chapters will discuss a wider range of writers including Alfred Droin, René Crayssac, Albert de Pouvourville, Jeanne Leuba, Myriam Harry and Clotilde Chivas-Baron.

Throughout *Decadent Indochina*, the ambivalent nature of Decadence will reappear in cross-examination with colonial discourse, resulting in a political and colonial form of Decadence. *Fin-de-siècle* colonial literature of Indochina, while abetting colonial ideology, is also inherently informed by doubts, anxieties and critical reassessment from the outset. If at times French domination and superiority are asserted to secure and legitimise France's presence outside the *métropole*, at others, possibilities for alternative forms of intercultural relationship, other than that rooted in traditional colonial exchange, appear to be both desired and desirable.

Chapter One

Opiate Indochina

Seen with an ambivalent sentiment of fascination and repulsion, opium exists at the intersection of history and story, reality and myth, feeding into Western phantasmagoria of the Orient as morally corrupted at times and invigorating at others. At the beginning of the twentieth century opium smoking was widely considered in France as ‘un vice oriental’.¹ In contrast to Romantic opium, which was associated mainly with the Levantine Orient and particularly Turkey, *fin-de-siècle* opium came to connote almost exclusively the ‘Extrême-Orient’. This new ‘mode de fumeries’ had gained popularity and prestige in the Paris of the 1890s, particularly among the French elite of the literary and artistic scenes, after the Romantic opium eating and the ‘morphinomanie’ of the 1870s.²

Le Petit Journal of 1903 (Figure 1) reports this arising practice in an alarming tone:

Un vice épouvantable, spécial, jusqu’à ces dernières années, aux peuples et aux habitants de l’Extrême-Orient, tend de plus en plus à se répandre en France où nous n’avions cependant guère besoin de cette nouvelle calamité. [...] Comme *les Chinois ou les Annamites*, nos compatriotes ont pris goût au plaisir de tremper la longue aiguille dans le poison qui, chauffé doucement au feu de la petite lampe, se dépose ensuite dans la pipe et s’aspire en une bouffée, procurant une extase d’une idéalité contestable, mais d’un danger certain. [...] *Notre vieille race, déjà si affaiblie*, avait bien besoin de ce vice nouveau!³

¹ ‘Tous les jeunes officiers fument, disait un médecin. Les exceptions ne font que confirmer la règle et bientôt le plus grand nombre des officiers de la marine de l’État sera devenu la proie de *ce vice oriental* si l’on n’y met bon ordre dès à présent. J’ai vu des jeunes enseignes se cloîtrer du matin au soir pour absorber des soixante, quatre-vingts pipes.’ Richard Maillant, *La Drogue* (Paris: Librairie Africaine et Colonial, 1910), p. 326, cited in Arnould de Liedekerke, *La Belle Époque de l’opium* (Paris: Édition de la Différence ‘les Essais’ 2001), p. 184. My emphasis.

² Jean-Jacques Yvorel, ‘La Fumerie d’opium en France’, *Toxicodépendancias*, 2 (1997), 15-22 (p. 16).

³ My emphasis. See Annex 1 for the full document.

While partly deriving from the psycho-cultural threat of the ‘Péril Jaune’,⁴ the fear of contamination expressed by this article is to be linked to the French colonisation of Indochina as well as the widespread perceptions of threats of Western decadence during the *fin-de-siècle* period. In contrast to the spread of opium dens in England and the United States where Chinese workers were the main instigators, the specific technique of opium smoking was disseminated in France from French ports by naval officers and *ex-colons* who brought this new habit back with them from Indochina as early as the 1850s.⁵ A décor offering exotic *chinoiserie* ‘authenticated’ by the presence of a native *boy*, the sensuously abandoned posture of opium smokers as well as descriptions of the sophisticated ritual of opium smoking and its elaborate paraphernalia are combined into a way that was to prove enduring in the metropolitan imagination of the Far East in general and Indochina in particular. The article’s alarming tone reflects an era when medical discourse on intoxication had begun to dominate,⁶ in contrast to nineteenth-century literary discourse on intoxication that was increasingly accused of encouraging an aesthetic sublimation of addiction.

Within the critical discourse of the literature of intoxication and historical studies of the ‘drugs cult’, the colonial literature of Indochina has been acknowledged as one of the richest corpora contributing to the ‘littérature des paradis artificiels’ in the French tradition alongside such canonical figure as Baudelaire.⁷ In parallel with the presence of opium dens

⁴ Coined by the Russian sociologist Jacques Novicow in his article ‘Le Péril Jaune’ published in the *Revue Internationale de Sociologie* in February 1897. This racialist fear of the conquest and domination of the Asian race over Western Europe was brought to the fore by the defeat of the Russian army by the Japanese in 1904-5.

⁵ Ami-Jacques Rapin, ‘La “divine drogue”: l’art de fumer l’opium et son impact en Occident au tournant des XIXe et XXe siècles’, *A contrario*, 1 (2003), 6-31 (p. 18), and Liedekerke, *La Belle Époque de l’opium*, p. 169. By 1914, one thousand two hundred more or less clandestine opium dens were to be found in Paris (François Chast, ‘Les Origines de la législation sur les stupéfiants en France’, *Histoire des sciences médicales*, xliii, 3 (2009), 293-305 (p. 295).

⁶ François Chast, ‘Les Origines de la législation sur les stupéfiants en France’, p. 298-299.

⁷ In the cultural history of intoxication, the *fin de siècle* is one of the most widely studied periods. A number of ‘artificial’ drugs – including opium and its derivatives, morphine, cocaine, heroin - were discovered and became popular during this time, partly because the medical and legal discourses on drugs had not yet gained the hegemonic status that they would acquire later from the 1910s onwards. Alongside more recent studies quoted above, the chapter ‘Le sortilège de l’opium’ in *L’Exotisme indochinois dans la littérature française depuis 1860* by Louis Malleret can be considered one of the first attempts in systematically drawing up a typology of the opium theme by focusing on the aesthetic role opium plays in the choice of narrative modes as well as its epistemological potential in understanding the psychology of the colonised peoples (2 vols. (Paris: L’Harmattan, [1934] 2014),

in the *métropole*, the trope of opium emerged in the colonial literature of Indochina with Paul Bonnetain's 1886 novel, *L'Opium*. Here, alongside the influence of Naturalism, decadent aesthetics are already at play, and 'la fumée noire' emerges as a powerful signifier of decadent Indochina. In tune with much postcolonial criticism whose view of exoticism is 'now largely unequivocal and unquestioning',⁸ Nicola Cooper dismisses opium as being part of the shorthand vocabulary that served merely for the purpose of exoticism. Non-specific to the French experience of Indochina, it could be applied, Cooper contends, indifferently to Indochina as much as China.⁹ While this critical view brings out the stereotypical exoticist aspect of the Indochinese opium theme, it nonetheless does not take into account the ambivalent potential of the literary opium theme that can be read as both exoticist and at the same time a disruptive motif within the Franco-Indochinese intercultural encounter. Indeed, as we shall see, its stock-in-trade nature is strategically embraced by decadent aesthetics. The 'indifferent' conflation of China and Indochina, denounced by Cooper, reflects in fact a complex historical reality encountered by the French in Indochina particularly with regards to the opium trade as well as the nationalist movement that involved the Chinese.

Before focusing on key texts on opium by Paul Bonnetain and Claude Farrère, I will discuss Jules Boissière's *Propos d'un intoxiqué* (1890).¹⁰ Boissière is an important figure in relation to the link between decadent aesthetics and the literature of Indochina. His monograph on opium represents not only one of the fullest early articulations of the newly formed relationship between opium and the Far East, but it also lays the ground for a number of key aspects associated with the trope of opium that were to be explored in later fiction.

vol. 2, pp. 17-42). Eugène Pujarniscle's chapter, 'L'opium' also exemplifies the tendency of the critical discourse of the 1930s which seeks to correct false preconceptions of opium usage by exposing its real and true effects. linking literature to extra-literary 'vérité'. This reflects the ideological stance of these early critical writings in establishing a place for colonial literature within metropolitan literary history (*Philoxène ou la littérature coloniale en France*, pp. 141-8).

⁸ Forsdick, 'Travelling Concepts', 12-29.

⁹ Cooper, *France in Indochina*, p. 162.

¹⁰ Jules Boissière, *Propos d'un intoxiqué* (Paris: Louis-Michaud, [1890] 1947).

Inspired by Boissière's experience as an opium smoker, this short story is presented by a framing narrator who relays the eight-volume confession given to him by a French opium addict living in Indochina. *Propos* posits the literary trope of opium primarily at the interplay of a dynamic intertextuality between earlier literatures of intoxication. These range from French Romantic travel writing of the Levantine Orient – 'Le Voyage en Orient' – to the mid-century opiate writings represented by Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire, particularly the latter's translation of Thomas De Quincey. In Baudelaire, opium is no longer an exotic affair belonging to the faraway lands but a metropolitan-based practice in view of recreational and creative effects.¹¹ The relationship between opium and stories inherited from the Romantic cross-fertilisation between the *fantastique* and exoticism, as it is exemplified in particular by Gautier's 'conte fantastique' *La Pipe d'opium* (1838), is characteristic of the opiate 'rêve méditatif' (p. 49).

While picking up on this 'héritage livresque'¹² in relation to Europe's view of Oriental opium, Boissière's *Propos* initiates a shift towards a colonial way of smoking 'le Dieu Opium', embedding it within a specific historical and geographical framework. Indeed, Boissière's treatment of opium epitomises a complete move away from the *Romantic opium eating*

¹¹ For the study of French Romantic travelogues and opium, see Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971). For the aesthetic Orient constructed by the French 'pilgrims' and writers, see Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 166-97. Deflecting opium from its socially accepted therapeutic use, Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) can be considered the first literary text that explores, in a systematic manner, the hedonistic value of the 'drug' as stimulant and narcotic. Opium is celebrated as the 'creative muse' but also as the source of 'spleen' and torture. The Romantic concept of 'genius' underpins the discourse from which De Quincey draws his account on intoxication. The Englishman's dualistic view of opium as the source of pleasure and suffering exerted a great influence on the ensuing writings of opiate intoxication, particularly continental writers from Baudelaire to Henri Michaux, and also on the French colonial writers in Indochina indirectly through these metropolitan writings. *Confessions* was first translated in 1828 by Alfred de Musset with the pseudonym A.D.M. and later retranslated by Baudelaire under the title, 'Un Mangeur d'opium' in *Les Paradis artificiels* published in 1860. For a comparative study of the moral and ethical aspects of opium intoxication in Baudelaire and De Quincey, see Damian Catani, 'The "Spleen" and "Idéal" of Opium: Baudelaire and Thomas De Quincey', *Dix-Neuf*, 17 (2013), 237-50. In the 1850s France, the famous 'Club des Hachichins' at the Hôtel Pimodan under the guidance of two doctors Albert-Roche and Moreau de Tours was mainly conceived for the recreational experimentation of drugs. It was frequented by Gautier, Nerval, Delacroix, Dumas with Baudelaire and Balzac as observers. Gautier named a volume of his *fantastique* short stories after the club in 1848.

¹² Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu, 'L'Opium dans le contexte de l'imaginaire colonial. Voyages dans l'Orient et intoxications opiacées', *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov*, 2 (2009), 59-64 (p. 62).

towards the *decadent opium smoking*.¹³ While an allusion to the new pairing of opium with the Far East (rather than Turkey) is to be found in the haunting figure of the Malay in De Quincey's *Confession*,¹⁴ its ultimate consolidation in French literature is made possible by the French colonisation of Indochina, which introduced the French to the new mode of consumption by smoking. The 'méthode thébaïque extrême-orientale' came to replace the 'opiophagy' of the Romantic period with its laudanum and lozenges. Like many new technologies, this material innovation provoked a radical shift in aesthetic experience, which required a new mode of expression. Gautier's 'exotic aestheticism', Edgar Allan Poe's 'supernatural' vision as well as Baudelaire's modern take on drugs as the privileged medium for the 'paradis artificiels' paved the way for decadent opiate fetishism.¹⁵

Late-Romantic clichés are thus consciously recycled along with the marked weariness characteristic of the decadent attitude of belatedness – 'Tout cela [...] répondant à toutes les descriptions déjà lues, à tous les récits entendus déjà.' (p. 41). At the same time, they are being localised with exotic clichés arising out of Indochina (Eastern philosophy and poetry, elephants, tigers, tropical forests (p. 49), decorative dragons, Buddhist monks (p. 66), sunset in Laos (p. 72)). However, the danger inherent in opiate intoxication constantly threatens the

¹³ Even as opium *eating* was the norm throughout Europe, a record of a precocious practice of opium smoking appeared in Théophile Gautier's *La Pipe d'opium*. However, this practice was 'marginal dans la première moitié du XIX^e siècle face à la consommation dominante du laudanum.' Moreover, the description of the technique used by Gautier proved to be much less elaborate and very different from the one being developed in China at the same time, but rather 'une technique rudimentaire de fumerie.' (Jean-Jacques Yvoret, *Les Poisons de l'esprit: drogues et drogués au XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Quai Voltaire, 1992), p. 23). Notwithstanding the presence of opium smoking, *La Pipe d'opium* still associates opium with the old Levant treated in Romantic vein as the muse of creativity, a source and a pretext for 'ivresse', 'extases' and 'hallucination' (*Œuvres de Théophile Gautier*, 2 vols (Paris: A. Lemerre, [1838] 1897), vol. 1, pp. 453-66).

¹⁴ The 'Malay' arrives one day, unannounced, at the door of his cottage in the English Lake District, and De Quincey gave him 'a piece of opium' which he consumed 'at one mouthful'. This incident subsequently plays a haunting role in his opium-fuelled nightmares in which the Malay brought 'other Malays with him, worse than him that ran "a-muck" at [De Quincey], and led [him] into a world of troubles.' (*Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1822] 2013), p. 58). The footnote provided by De Quincey to explain "a-muck" unveils the intertextual nature of this 'anxiety', fuelled by the reading of other travel writings.

¹⁵ Mario Praz sees in Gautier 'the true and genuine founder of [...] the school of exotic aestheticism' (*The Romantic Agony* (London: Oxford University Press, [1933] 1970), p. 213). Baudelaire writes about Poe that 'le résultat de l'opium pour les sens est de revêtir la nature entière d'un intérêt surnaturel qui donne à chaque objet un sens plus profond, plus volontaire, plus despotique.' ('Exposition universelle (1855)', in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 596). For a study of opium in Huymans's *À rebours* and its connection with De Quincey and capitalism, see Alina Clej, 'Fabricated Visions: From the Opium-Eater to Des Esseintes', in *Symbolism, its Origins and its Consequences*, ed. by Rosina Neginsky (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), pp. 291-308.

addict. The aestheticist paraphernalia is recognised as ‘tout cet arsenal de suicide’ (p. 68). The derivative, hackneyed and ahistorical nature of the traditional trope of opium, reclaimed through an investigation of its historical and geographical embeddedness within *fin-de-siècle* colonial exoticism, forms part of the defining characteristics of decadent Indochinese opium. This movement illustrates the process by which Decadence could be seen as a ‘travelling aesthetics’.

As such, the aesthetic and literary sides of opium smoking in *Propos* cannot be separated from its embeddedness in colonial wars (p. 71-2) as well as day-to-day realities which expose the complex nature of the colonial experience. The cultural space of the opium den (which can be both public and private) charts a social and ethnographic map composed of a typical series of native ‘types’ revolving around the ritual of smoking, such as the *boy*, the *lettré* and the *congai*.¹⁶ Another recurrent ‘type’, the Chinese, are invoked solely by their ethnic affiliation, invariably in male subaltern roles.¹⁷ In fact, the Chinese were involved in every step of the exploitative opium trade in Indochina: from production to sale and consumption. A closer examination of their presence reveals a lesser-known aspect of opium in Indochina: its role in the economic policy and military actions of the French rule.

Since the early period of colonisation in Cochinchina, the ‘opium question’ was central and considered a solution to the problem of revenue and fiscal policy for the French administration. The latter began exploiting the already existing local farming system in 1882 and gradually came to the solution of ‘la Régie de l’opium’, an opium monopoly whose importance was fully apparent in the general budget presented by the Governor General Paul

¹⁶ *Congai* is part of French colonial nomenclature referring to native concubines. This female figure will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

¹⁷ Chinese women are mostly absent in colonial literature, reflecting the exclusively male population of the Chinese immigrant community during this period. The Chinese were often integrated into host societies through marriage with local women (although they already had a Chinese wife back home). This interracial marriage and the practice of polygamy (mostly for well-to-do families) were seen as part of a strategy for integration, in contrast to the French *colons* who sought to maintain strict racial boundaries. See Ha, ‘The Chinese and the White Man’s Burden in Indochina’.

Doumer in 1899 alongside two other important state-sponsored monopolies, on salt and rice alcohol.¹⁸ Chinese traders were entitled opium farmers long before the establishment of the *Régie* and continued to be so later mainly because the preparation of ‘Chandoo’ – the purified opium paste specific for opium smoking – required Chinese *savoir-faire* and skilful labour.¹⁹ This administrative and fiscal system was adopted as a solution not only to the problem of financial self-sufficiency the colony had faced since its beginnings, but also to the military agenda of ‘pacification’, in particular that of Tonkin. The *Régie* was partly intended to reduce the influence of the ‘pirates’²⁰ at the frontier of China, whose revenue came essentially from contraband opium. By controlling the price of opium, they deprived the pirates of one of their main sources of income. Opium was thus both a financial strategy and a military weapon. Its role was crucial in the construction of infrastructure in Indochina as well as the political consolidation of French rule at the turn of the century. Within this context the figure of the Chinese is equivocal and multifaceted. He represents the pirate, the subaltern, the immigrant, the businessman as well as a colonial partner and sympathiser. On the basis of their racial and social differences, the Chinese remain an intermediary ‘Other’ between the European and the native, but at other times, they are part of the native societies, melting into the colonial landscape.

The presence of the figure of the Chinese in the evocation of opium smoking is not only due to the multi-ethnic reality of colonial societies. It also stems from the involvement of the Chinese in the initiation of opium smoking in the Far East. Boissière makes a well-

¹⁸ For a historical account of the development of the ‘Régie’, and the political, economic and moral debates, see in particular the first and second chapters of Chantal Descours-Gatin, *Quand l’opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine: l’élaboration de la régie générale de l’opium, 1860 à 1914* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1992).

¹⁹ Curiously enough, the French never possessed the key to the fabrication of Chandoo even under the ‘Régie’ (Descours-Gatin, p. 43). Descours-Gatin argues that the need for Chinese intermediaries as both opium farmers and labour testifies to the weakness inherent in this system from the beginning (p. 94-7).

²⁰ These pirates consisted mainly of the Chinese and Vietnamese leaders known as the ‘Pavillons noirs’ and ‘Pavillons jaunes’ due to the colour of the flag they used, but also of Europeans, especially Frenchmen, for example the ‘Roi de la Rivière [Noire]’ depicted as ‘le type du contrebandier européen’ by Albert de Pourville in his story about the Pavie mission (*Dans les seize Chaûs (1888-1889)* (Paris: Chamuel, 1895), p. 15). These *marlords* and petty smugglers had strong relationships with the Chinese from the South of China to whom they sold illegal opium.

informed allusion to the history of opium smoking when rebuking Bonnetain for his ‘erronée’ appreciation of opium in *L’Opium*, clarifying one of the most ingrained ‘myths’ about opium smoking in the Far East. Bonnetain’s hero is dismissed for his superficial knowledge of opium smoking as being a millennial practice. Rather, as Boissière puts it, in ‘L’Extrême-Orient, Annam ou Chine, [...] L’Opium est d’importation récente’ (p. 57). In contrast to what has been represented in literary and popular discourse, opium smoking is in fact a product of the ‘invention of tradition’,²¹ a recent cultural artefact resulting from the capitalist and colonial expansionism at its height in the nineteenth century.

If opium was believed to be introduced to the ‘Celestial Empire’ between the fifth and eighth centuries by the Arabs for medicinal purpose, it was not until the discovery of the New World in the sixteenth and seventeenth century that the native American pipe was introduced by the Dutch and Portuguese in Batavia, Java and the China Sea to pair with a mixture of tobacco, opium and spices.²² As for the ‘méthode thébaïque’, different theories have been put forward to account for the origin of the smoking pipe and rituals in China. It has been generally thought that the technique was finessed in China during the second half of the eighteenth century, with the pipe developed from the tobacco pipe. This was the period during which Indian opium, cultivated mainly in Bengal by the British East Indian Company, was imported into China increasing its demand among Chinese smokers.²³ The invention of the new technique might even have fueled enthusiasm for the drug and the opium pipe became a generalised practice in China at the turn of the nineteenth century.²⁴ Although the substance had been legally banned in China since 1729 (the first of a series of many attempts to eradicate it), contraband trade between British India and China continued.

²¹ *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²² Paul Butel, *L’Opium: histoire d’une fascination* (Paris: Perrin, 1995).

²³ The British East Indian Company controlled the cultivation zone in Bengal from the 1760s and established a monopoly on opium production in 1793.

²⁴ Rapin, ‘La “divine drogue”’, 6-31.

The opium trade was enmeshed in British colonial policy and economic expansionism as a means of compensating for the trade imbalance caused by British desire for products from the East such as silk, tea, porcelain and lacquerware. The unequal commercial exchange between the British and the Chinese soon became the source of conflicts and sparked the infamous two Opium Wars in 1836-42 and 1856-60.²⁵ As such, the political nature of opium in French Indochina at the *fin de siècle* emerged as a result of inter-imperial and global capitalist rivalries (particularly between France, England and China), though for French Indochina, it was not opium smuggling but official reorganisation of the opium trade that played a key part in colonial consolidation. As for the importation of the Chinese opium-smoking technique into Indochina, no comprehensive research has yet been undertaken on the topic. However, Chinese immigration in the Southeast Asian region during the nineteenth century as well as the role of the Chinese as smokers and opium farm-owners were factors that probably contributed to the introduction of the Chinese technique into the region.

In contrast to the metropolitan literature of intoxication, the decadent trope of opium smoking in Boissière's *Propos* is articulated as fundamentally colonial and with an important dual function. Opium is presented as both a remedy against the boredom of colonial life and a means to penetrate native culture and psychology. This is a colonial twist on Baudelaire's interpretation of drugs as the means of exploring the modern individual subject. Drugs, particularly opium and hashish, allow the experience of disintegration of the self and, at the same time, the internationalisation of the Other.²⁶ Boissière recasts Baudelaire's epistemological theory beyond the boundaries of the addict's psychology towards the opening of the self to the Other in the intercultural encounter between East and

²⁵ There have been many historical discussions of the British opium trade and the Opium Wars. See for example Catherine Lamour and Michel R. Lamberti, *The Second Opium War* (London: Allen Lane, 1974). For the French role in the opium wars, see Jean Chesneaux, *Histoire de la Chine, des guerres de l'opium à la guerre franco-chinoise 1840-1885* (Paris: Hatier, 1969).

²⁶ Alain Toumayan, "Je est un autre": Identity, Alterity, and Drug Use in Baudelaire and De Quincey', in *Thinking Poetry: Philosophical Approaches to Nineteenth-Century French Poetry*, ed. by Joseph Acquisto (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 59-73.

West. If opium promises the occasionally frightening experience of self-discovery (including self-fragmentation, if not self-dissolution), it also represents the ‘intermédiaire vers l’autre exotique’ with an ethics oriented towards the (colonised) Other, as we shall see. As such, Boissière’s theory of opium foreshadows Victor Segalen’s theory of ‘Le Divers’ in its praise of diversity and resistance against the assimilation of difference into sameness. Through the seemingly heightened senses and acute intelligence provoked by opium, Boissière’s intercultural agenda, followed by many writers examined in this chapter, leads at times to the blurring of the neat racial frontier between coloniser and colonised.

The political, aesthetic and epistemological implications of decadent opium will be the focus of this chapter. Although it always risks slipping into cliché, opium also operates as a destabilising principle, offering a possibility of new modes of insight into the ambivalent experience of colonial confrontation. Indochinese opium is not only experienced within the boundaries of the colony but also at home when the threat of contamination is brought back by *ex-colons*, materially as reported in *Le Petit Journal* and imaginatively as projected in literature.

PAUL BONNETAIN’S *L’OPIUM*: DECADENCE AS AN EXCESS OF NATURALISM

Voyageur et colonial après avoir été un boulevardier brillant,
Paul Bonnetain renouvela par une jolie note d’exotisme ses études,
parfois osées, sur les passions et les faiblesses de son temps.²⁷

L’Opium (1886) is the first novel in the French language set in Indochina.²⁸ Its author, Paul Bonnetain (1858-1899) (Figure 2), was a young writer who made his infamous debut with a Naturalist novel on onanism, *Charlot s’amuse* (1883). Published with the Belgian publisher

²⁷ ‘Roman français de 1900 à 1930’, *Larousse mensuel illustré: revue encyclopédique universelle*, 290 (1931), 680-6 (p. 681).

²⁸ Paul Bonnetain, *L’Opium* (Paris, Genève: Ressources, [1886] 1980).

Kistemaeckers, the novel caused a scandal but earned commercial success, leaving him with the nickname *Bonnemain*. During his five-year career in the Marine infantry (from 1876 to 1881) which led him to Martinique and Guyana, Bonnetain had discovered opium for the first time, but later quit the uniform and moved to Paris.

In an attempt to establish his name in the literary *milieux*, Bonnetain alternated between journalism and literary writing. He took part in the vibrant literary life of Paris, especially within the Naturalist movement, organising the Naturalist dinners with Paul Alexis and Henry Céard for example.²⁹ He was sent by *Le Figaro* to cover the Tonkin war in Tonkin and China for five months in 1884.³⁰ During this first Indochinese stay, he wrote a series of articles for the newspaper, endorsing the controversial French expansionist policy in Indochina undertaken by Jules Ferry. These articles, written in a style that intermingled war reports with the aesthetic impressions of a writer, were later published under the title *Au Tonkin* (1884).³¹ His predecessor at *Le Figaro*, who had witnessed earlier French assaults on Annam, was a Navy officer called Julien Viaud, better known by his pseudonym Pierre Loti. Depicting the war in an epico-lyrical tone, Loti revealed the violence and barbarism committed by the French.³² This incident provoked the end of Loti's collaboration with the newspaper and nearly ended his career in the Navy.

In 1885, Bonnetain took his second trip to Tonkin, China, and Japan during which he began the manuscript of *L'Opium*, which was published with the publisher G. Charpentier

²⁹ For a more comprehensive biography of Paul Bonnetain, see Frédéric Da Silva, 'Pour un naturalisme exotique', *Les Cahiers naturalistes*, 85 (2011), 67-75, and his introduction to Paul Bonnetain, *Au Tonkin* (Paris: L'Harmattan, [1884] 2010).

³⁰ Tonkin is the northernmost part of modern-day Vietnam, south of China's Yunnan and Guangxi provinces, east of Laos. The region is divided into the *Haut-Tonkin*, the sparsely populated highlands with their legendary hill tribes, and the *Bas-Tonkin*, the alluvial valleys in the delta of the *Fleuve Rouge*, which is fertile and densely populated.

³¹ For a study of the biographical circumstances of these articles and their importance in Bonnetain's literary background see Da Silva's Introduction to Bonnetain, *Au Tonkin*, pp. vi-xxv.

³² These articles appeared in the issues of September 28th and October 13th and 17th 1883. They were later edited and published in Pierre Loti, *Figures et choses qui passaient* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1898). The aftermath of the naval campaign in which Loti took part and the fourth months spent in the bay of Da Nang (Tourane) during the transfer of power to the French authorities are also recounted in his Pierre Loti, *Propos d'exil* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, [1887] 1912).

in June the following year. The year 1886 saw the publication of the Symbolist manifesto and the foundation of the journal *Le Décadent*, which marked the pivotal moment when Naturalism, while still at its height, was starting to be publicly put on trial by the new generation of writers.³³ Bonnetain was arguably at the forefront of this literary renewal when the divorce was announced with great fanfare by the ‘Manifeste des cinq’ in *Le Figaro* of 18 August 1887. Signed by five younger authors including Paul Bonnetain, the Manifeste condemned Zola’s Naturalist style in *La Terre*. The declaration of Bonnetain’s protagonist at the end of *L’Opium* – ‘Il n’existe pas d’écoles, il n’y a que du talent’ (p. 599) – seems to articulate Bonnetain’s own vision of the contemporary literary scene. Later, Bonnetain ended his letter addressing Jean Ajalbert in the same terms: ‘toutes mes sympathies sont aux jeunes revues dont la devise est: “Plus d’écoles: du talent!”’.³⁴

The interview Bonnetain later gave in Jules Huret’s famous *Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire* (1891) confirms his move away from Naturalism towards Decadence in tune with the *fin-de-siècle* literary current.³⁵ At the time, ‘secrétaire de rédaction’ of *Le Figaro’s Supplément littéraire*,³⁶ Bonnetain recounts the story of the ‘Manifeste des cinq’ and concedes the end of Naturalism while maintaining that ‘le réalisme reste invaincu’. He also refers to Huysmans as ‘le plus doué, le plus original, celui à qui le public doit le plus de sensations neuves’.³⁷ Huysmans’ influence, especially that of *À Rebours*, will be crucial in *L’Opium* as we shall see when examining Bonnetain’s decadent take on Naturalism.

³³ Yves Chevrel situated ‘le triomphe du naturalisme’ between 1885-1888, a period of consolidation but also the beginning of the reaction against its dominance (*Le Naturalisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1982), pp. 43-45).

³⁴ This letter was published with ‘Une préface inédite’ to *L’Opium* in *La Revue indépendante de littérature et d’art* (1888, 23-29 (p. 23)).

³⁵ *Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire* is a valuable historical document, attesting to the shifting literary mood of the *fin-de-siècle* and the fierce battles for fame and recognition in the age of mass communication. Contemporary writers, from various schools and movements, along with a small number of thinkers and scholars, were interviewed by Huret on questions concerning the current and future situation of French literature at the end of Naturalism. This series of sixty-four interviews, presented as a ‘reportage expérimental’ (p. 40), was published in the newspaper *L’Écho de Paris* between March and July 1891, before being published in a volume.

³⁶ Bonnetain took on this post on the 11th February 1888.

³⁷ Huret, *Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire*, pp. 251-2.

Against this shifting literary scene, *L'Opium* illustrates a hesitation between the Naturalist emphasis on physiological determinism and the decadent preoccupation with philosophy and aesthetics.³⁸ The latter threatens constantly to overflow and contaminate the dominant Naturalism from which it arises. Through aestheticism and the theme of opiate addiction, the decadent menace touches on the ideology of colonialism in such a way that patriotism and heroism, seen as the defining marks of the colonial enterprise, are undermined as mere illusions, despite Bonnetain's position in favour of the Tonkin war and colonisation in general. In a period when colonialism promises the possibility of new forms of exoticism, opiate Indochina emerges as a double-faced entity. Whilst holding out the promise for new sensations, the trope of opium also represents a decadent source of exhaustion and disillusionment. The novel becomes an articulation of disappointment about the realities of colonial Indochina. *L'Opium* thus marks the shift from Romantic exoticism towards decadent exoticism, for which the excessive and self-conscious iteration of clichés and aestheticist perversity are defining features. Ultimately, the representation of France's Far Eastern colony as a corrupted and corrupting land is symptomatic of the gradual process of global homogenisation.

The Flaubertian Naturalist Model

Marcel Deschamps, a 25-year-old 'névrosé' from Paris whose first two books of poetry, *Chimères* and *Angoisses*, had gained him a reputation as a promising young poet, becomes a 'fonctionnaire colonial' in Hanoi, following the end of his love affair with an actress, Claire Leroux. On board the ship *Le Messidor*, he falls in love with the virtuous Blanche Verdier, the wife of the newly appointed director to the colonial administration in Cochinchina, with

³⁸ Allan Curnew shows how Bonnetain's first novel *Charlot s'amuse* is already 'un étonnant roman *décadent*' by focusing on the paradoxical use of the theme of 'gaspillage' and 'dépense improductive' in 'Charlot s'amuse...: missel de la décadence', *Les Cahiers naturalistes*, 85 (2011), 135-44. Curnew's argument aligns with Leonard R. Koos's view of this novel as a preliminary break from the Naturalist school and a precursor of *fin-de-siècle* literature 'Touchy Subjects: Naturalist Influence and/or Naturalist Parody in Paul Bonnetain's *Charlot s'amuse*', *Excavatio*, 13 (2000), 180-9.

whom he has a platonic romance. After thirty-six days on *Le Messidor*, Marcel has to continue the journey to Tonkin on another ship, while the Verdiers' destination is Saigon in Cochinchina. At Hai-Phong where he disembarks to await another ship bound for Hanoi, he is initiated into opium use, first in a dirty brothel and later in a luxurious *fumerie* kept by a rich and cultivated Chinese man. In Hanoi, Blanche becomes Marcel's sole object of desire and obsession while he is living a monotonous and routine life surrounded by a circle of military officers and colonial administrators. The temptation of opium punctuates his life. The Verdiers' move to Hanoi uplifts his spirits for a time. But Blanche's mysterious sickness, which makes her 'anémisée' (p. 347), engenders a series of misunderstandings between them and causes her return to Paris. Meanwhile, Marcel participates in two bloody battles against the pirates, the 'Pavillons noirs',³⁹ becomes addicted to opium, gets treated for his opiate addiction, only to relapse repeatedly, leaves Hanoi for various missions around Tonkin and Annam, and acquires a *congai*. He succumbs to all these vices during a process in which he is 's'asiatisant' (p. 470).

In the end, upon inheriting a fortune from his aunt, Marcel leaves Indochina for Paris with a long stopover in Hong Kong. The last part of the novel narrates his encounters with his past lovers Claire and Blanche in Paris, both ending in disillusion like everything in his life, and his journey from Paris to Japan where he finally loses his life to opium.

From the outset, Bonnetain's 600-page novel is imbued with Naturalist aesthetics and can be read as a Naturalist study of opiate addiction in the same way that Zola's *L'Assommoir* is the study of alcoholism. A self-conscious reference to Zola can also be found

³⁹ The 'Pavillons noirs' were one of the most prominent Chinese bandit groups operating at the Chinese-Vietnamese border at the end of the nineteenth century. They became well-known to France following their decapitation of Francis Garnier in 1873. Although the emperor of Annam accepted the French protectorate in 1883, he nevertheless supported rebellions in Tonkin with the help of various Chinese bandits under the patronage of the Emperor of China. Saving Tonkin from these Black Flags was one of the reasons given for the French Pacification. On the French understanding of piracy, see in particular Julie D'Andurain and Jonathan Krause, 'Pirates, Slavers, Brigands and Gangs: The French Terminology of Anticolonial Rebellion, 1880–1920', *French History*, 31 (2017), 495-511. The Black Flags' leader is the main character of Pouvourville's novel, *L'Annam sanglant* examined in Chapter Two.

in the text: 'Il allait fumer comme on descend à l'Assommoir. Entré par curiosité chez Tchang [the Chinese owner of the *fumerie*] pour savoir si l'opium colorait la vie et sa fumée pouvait donner les bonheurs que l'absorption de laudanum donnait à de Quincey, il revenait quoique déçu, il revenait sans plus d'excuse et de prétexte — pour l'ivresse' (p. 250). The geographical choice of Indochina was also justified by invoking Zolian takes on the scientific 'enquête' and realism. In 'Une préface inédite' mentioned earlier, Bonnetain writes:

En ce qui touche particulièrement l'emploi fumé du népanthès homérique, l'enquête ne saurait rien avoir d'exact, l'Europe ignorant ce mode de bonheur, ou s'en tenant à l'absorption de laudanum, aux injections sous-cutanées de chlorhydrate de morphine, et l'Asie Mineure ne possédant que des *afiondjis*. Émile Zola aurait-il écrit, tel qu'il a écrit, son merveilleux *Assommoir*, si le père Colombe avait exercé à six mille lieues de la Chapelle?...⁴⁰

All the recognizable elements which constitute the genre can be found: the downward spiral plot; 'scientific' discourse on heredity combined with 'le travail des milieux et de l'éducation' which is called upon to explain Marcel's 'susceptibilité malade' (p. 70-71); the presence of certain character types (professional types like the doctor and the military, the *demi-mondaine* lover, the virtuous lover, prostitutes, the positivist, the liberal Catholic, the romantic etc.). Medical discourse on the pathology of opiate addiction is rendered through descriptive passages on the anatomy of the addict's body, the cyclic period of needs, withdrawal and relapses, opiate nightmares and hallucinations.

Zolian influences notwithstanding, Bonnetain's Naturalism seems to draw more on the Flaubertian model than that of the Goncourt and Zola. Following David Baguley, two fundamental types of Naturalist novel can be defined: a Goncourtian/Zolian type with its 'tragic mode of the fall' triggered by 'particular determining factors' on one hand, and a Flaubertian type with its gradual 'process of disillusionment' in which 'the determining factor is more generalised'.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Bonnetain, 'Une préface inédite', 23-29 (p. 24).

⁴¹ David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 'Cambridge studies in French', 1990), pp. 95-6.

More static than dynamic, the plot of *L'Opium*, although it appears to have a general downhill trajectory triggered mainly by opium, is essentially repetitive and goes nowhere. Since the beginning of the novel, Marcel's (mis)fortunes are already decided. His existence is full of 'tristesses' and 'malheurs' (p. 7), and 'dégout de vivre' (p. 13). His love story with Claire is aborted because of his own lack of will (p. 9) and in spite of her love for him; his artistic ambition is undermined by 'les exigences de son esthétique jamais satisfaite [qui] avaient stérilisé toutes ses ambitions littéraires et crevé tous ses rêves' (p. 8 and 110). The nihilistic philosophy of the novel (p. 109) is reflected in the recognition that he has no freedom (p. 9).

Once in Tonkin, all he can see is the 'monotonie du spectacle' (p. 265). In the beginning, his love for Blanche and opium are the two antidotes against this *mal du pays*. But, by the end, it is 'indifférence' that reigns over everything. Love, politics, literature, and even imperialist actions are all vanity:

Ne croire à rien, reprenait-il, pas même à la vulgaire honnêteté, considérer que devant la fatalité du mal, devant la cruauté de l'infini, devant l'universelle douleur, art et vertu sont des duperies, inutiles comme l'action (p. 555-6)

Even different civilisations, places and countries – the 'couleurs locales'⁴² much celebrated by writers of the exotic like Pierre Loti – that Marcel comes across through his voyage around the world are reduced to the same 'absence d'horizon' (p. 560-1). Marcel's tragedy can thus be depicted as a Flaubertian "comedy" of human illusions and of the trivialities of bourgeois existence, now seemingly ratified by a philosophy of resignation'.⁴³ What ensues from this aesthetic and ideological position, in reaction against the Zolian type, is an evolution towards 'more ironical and parodic modes of representation'.⁴⁴

This parody characteristic of the Flaubertian model fits in with Bonnetain's earlier writing, a parody of Naturalism called *Un progrès* published in the satirical journal *Beaumarchais*

⁴² For a discussion of this concept in aesthetic and literary theories, see Vladimir Kapor, *Local Colour: A Travelling Concept* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009).

⁴³ Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction*, p. 139.

⁴⁴ Baguley, p. 139 and 140.

in 1881.⁴⁵ I propose to focus on how decadent themes and aesthetics inform irony and parody directed at Naturalism, especially *vis-à-vis* the banality of bourgeois discourse and the conventional trajectory of the Naturalist plot. Decadence, deployed in particular in the characterisation of the hero and in relation to the opium *topos*, destabilises the dominant Naturalist facture of the text as a whole and results in a ‘contamination’ by perverse exoticism even in the most violent battle scene.

The Decadent Metaphysical Hero

Baudelaire’s conception of a drug addict and aesthete serves as the model for Bonnetain’s opium addict protagonist. He cites a long passage from Baudelaire’s ‘Livre IV. L’Homme-Dieu’, in which the author of *Les Paradis artificiels* sketches out a complete portrait of an opium and hashish addict as ‘l’homme sensible moderne’: ‘un tempérament moitié nerveux, moitié bilieux’, ‘un esprit cultivé’, ‘un cœur tendre fatigué par le malheur’, ‘des fautes anciennes [...] sinon des remords positifs, au moins le regret du temps profané et mal rempli’ as well as ‘le goût de la métaphysique’.⁴⁶ In order to play out the Naturalist trajectory of opium addiction, Marcel is represented as a Decadent, in the same manner as Huysmans’ decadent hero, Des Esseintes, who is also caught up in a flattening Naturalist narrative.

The Naturalist scheme of physiological determinism is expressed through Marcel’s decadent body marked by pathological signs.⁴⁷ Androgynous, his mouth is ‘trop féminine en

⁴⁵ ‘Un progrès’ constitutes a fictive letter written to the editor of the journal by the director of a fictive *École littéraire* to promote his school. It gives a selection of excerpts written by his students in Naturalist style. The topics cover ‘Rencontre de deux anciens amants après vingt ans de séparation’, ‘Sommeil d’ivrogne’ etc. It is a parody of Naturalist dogmatism and a critique of the commodification of literature in an industrial era in which the taste of the readership dictates literary production. See Paul Bonnetain, ‘Un progrès’, *Beaumarchais: journal satirique, littéraire et financier*, 42 (1881), 5-6.

⁴⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard ‘La Pléiade’, 1975), vol. 1, p. 429, cited in Bonnetain, ‘Une préface inédite’, 23-29 (p. 27 and 28).

⁴⁷ George Ross Ridge argues that every Decadent is “pathological” in the modern norms, but the concept is simply not important in the decadent worldview. It is superfluous, meaningless’ (*The Hero in French Decadent Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1961), p. 49 and 54.) Ridge’s primary methodology is to define the decadent hero against the Romantic hero, from which predecessor the former both borrows as well as discards certain characteristics. While this approach is compellingly informative because it allows the identification of a number of characteristic elements which constitute the Decadent, it makes no reference to the Naturalist hero whose characteristics seem to straddle the Romantic and the Decadent.

sa pureté'; he has 'un cou de femme', but with 'la vigueur masculine trahie par la pommette et les sourcils' (p. 18). Marcel's physiology is a manifestation of his psychology. He possesses 'le raffinement de névrose' (p. 13), 'une sorte de supériorité aristocratique' and a 'dignité passant pour dédain' (p. 65). His 'sensibilité malade' is explained by his analysis of his childhood and the relationship between and with his parents (p. 66-68). The Tainean credo of 'race, milieu, moment' underpins Marcel's characterization and seals his destiny.

However, if the doctrine of materialism is used to explain certain aspects of his 'nervosisme'⁴⁸ (p. 325), his moral and physical degeneration into opiate addiction is also to be found in a deeper metaphysical attitude. Marcel is what we can call a decadent 'metaphysical hero'.⁴⁹ Indeed, it is the decadent mindset that displaces *L'Opium* from the Goncourtian/Zolian model to the Flaubertian model, from a medical and scientific to a more metaphysically grounded one. His world-weariness is reflected in the supreme lassitude which is underpinned by an acute sense of the aestheticism inherent in his philosophical attitude: 'le génie aujourd'hui s'appelle névrose. (...) Être dilettante [*sic*]: voilà la sagesse' (p. 601).⁵⁰

Pathological, Marcel is above all an aesthete, with 'sa pensée de Latin sensitif' (p. 8). Since the beginning of the novel, he feels as if he has already lived: 'ses lectures *précoces*', 'ses humiliations *précoces*, sa *précoce* expérience du mal' (p. 70, emphasis in the text). This precociousness results in disillusionment and inactivity. Informed by the decadent worldview

⁴⁸ The *Littre* defines 'nervosisme' as a 'maladie caractérisée par des troubles du système nerveux, ayant pour siège la sensibilité, l'intelligence et le mouvement, maladie dite aussi état nerveux, névropathie protéiforme'. The *Trésor de la langue française* quotes a passage from Paul Bourget's famous *Essai de psychologie contemporaine*: 'l'homme moderne tel que nous le voyons aller et venir sur les boulevards de Paris, porte dans ses membres plus grêles, dans la physionomie trop expressive de son visage, dans le regard trop aigu de ses yeux, la trace évidente d'un sang appauvri, d'une énergie musculaire diminuée, d'un nervosisme exagéré' (*Essai de psychologie contemporaine*, vol. 1, p. 118). This medical term as used here by Bourget is underpinned by the contemporary idea of physical and moral degeneration.

⁴⁹ Ridge, *The Hero in French Decadent Literature*, p. 48.

⁵⁰ A. E. Carter argues that what differentiates Huysmans's from Zola's Naturalism in the treatment of degenerates is the former's metaphysical tone and 'self-conscious taste for corruption'. Huysmans also depicts pathological neurosis with a Baudelairian 'touch of glamour' which gives Des Esseintes' mania 'a metaphysical tone much nearer to *Les Fleurs du Mal* than to the *Rougon-Macquart*' (*The Idea of Decadence in French Literature*, pp. 89-90).

marked by the decline of civilisations and the aftermath of progress, this disillusionment is expressed in the sentiment of ‘belatedness’, that everything has been already seen, done and written.⁵¹

Opium as the Decadent Excess of Naturalism

If the opium *topos* sets out to offer a Naturalist account of moral and physical degeneration, it constantly contributes to tipping the narrative over into Decadence, firstly through ironic self-awareness and, secondly, through opiate dreams and hallucination.

Marcel analyses his own downfall throughout the novel, drawing upon a pathological diagnosis in the Naturalist manner, albeit relayed with irony:

Peut-être représentait-il pour le médecin un simple, mais précieux objet d'étude psychologique et médicale! Un jour, on lirait dans les *Archives de médecine navale* un mémoire relatant les effets de l'opium sur un tempérament nervoso-sanguin, sur une imagination malade, éprise de chimères, mémoire dont lui, Deschamps, aurait inconsciemment fourni le sujet avec l'*observation!* [...] Cette mentale dépravation, il en eut surtout nettement conscience (p. 382-3. Emphasis in the text)

However, a constant tension is played out between this pathological analysis and Marcel's attraction to morbidity and voluptuousness provoked by opiate intoxication. Like Des Esseintes, Marcel is well aware of being trapped in a Naturalist determinism with no exit, and yet, at times, enjoys this entrapment. He is at once a Naturalist hero and an aesthete of opiate sensations:

Cependant, même momentanément dégagé de L'Opium où se décuplait en une morbide misanthropie sa désespérance d'amour, le rêveur, à présent intoxiqué, ne retrouvait point son ordinaire vision des hommes et de la vie, sa tristesse normale sans exagération [*sic*] d'injustice. [...] Il ne souffrait pas moins qu'avant sa rechute à la fumerie, mais il se complaisait à sa souffrance, et son cerveau la caressait voluptueusement, *touched with pensiveness* (p. 383. Emphasis in the text).⁵²

⁵¹ Marcel expresses this very same sentiment, in particular by resorting to the recurrent motif of excess ('trop', p. 231-2) and banality, *vis-à-vis* Indochina and also other exotic places he travels to. The image of the sensitive Latin can be linked to the idea that the decline of the Roman Empire was being replicated in the French nineteenth century, as attested in various artistic productions such as Thomas Couture's painting *La Décadence romaine* (1847) or Joséphin Péladan's epic series of 21 novels on *La Décadence latine* (1884-1925).

⁵² This quote from De Quincey was already famous by the time of *L'Opium*. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam for example contributed to its fame by using the direct quote 'touched with pensiveness' in his *Claire Lenoir* (1867) (Pierrot, *L'Imaginaire décadent* (1880-1900), p. 47).

The temptation of the ‘fumée bleue’ arouses his perversity; he savours the ‘lutte’ only because ‘la certitude de la défaite, tout à l’heure, chatouillait sa perversité’ (p. 250). He transforms from an aesthete into a pervert under the influence of opium. This theme of aesthetic, and also sexual, perversion later finds its fullest expression in Boissière’s characters of the decadent mandarin and the decadent French officer in *Fumeurs d’opium*, examined later in this chapter. In the case of Marcel, his sexual perversion culminates in the scene where he ends up, under the influence of opium, making love to Loulou, a *métisse* who is the *congai* of Herthol, a ‘décivilisé’ opium addict. Sex with Loulou, – ‘cette machine d’amour’ who is ‘bestiale’, a Eurasian who speaks ‘en deux langues’ during the love act (p. 402) –, is transgressive and thus signifies Marcel’s point of no return.

Under the influence of ‘l’âcre et fort parfum de L’Opium’ (p. 171), Marcel quickly falls into hallucinatory visions, which culminate in the episode of ‘l’exotisme dans l’Horreur’ (p. 442), revealing opium’s links to the two realms of Decadence and exoticism. Indochina is ‘felt’, as opium smoke constitutes the site of perversity endowed with ‘les troublants mystères d’une enfantine civilisation perversement décadente’ (p. 152).⁵³ This discourse of the decadent Orient, common in European literature of the period, was largely used to justify imperialist ideology.⁵⁴ Indeed, in *L’Opium*, the Indochinese are depicted as degenerate, primitive and barbarian. Between India and China, as the geographical name assigned by the French indicates, they are bastards: ‘l’Annamite bâtard dégénéré à qui plusieurs races léguaient leurs seules infériorités et les vices d’un sang trop vieux’ (p. 334). Racism is underpinned by racialism, that is the scientific discourse that essentialises a hierarchy of races

⁵³ Disembarking from the ship on a *sampan* in order to reach the first Tonkinese town of Haiphong, Marcel is startled by two ‘hermaphrodites’ rowers (p. 151), who later come to haunt his opiate dreams, along with other figures. It is this experience of ambiguous sexual identity that allows him to build up the decadent image of Indochina. For a study of the Indochinese androgyny, see Jennifer Yee, ‘Indochine Androgynie’: Androgyny in Turn-of-the-Century French Writing on Indochina’, *Textual Practice*, 15.2 (2001), 269-82. This interplay between sexuality and Decadence in the making of Indochinese imagery is analysed in Chapter Two.

⁵⁴ This point constitutes one of the main arguments of Said’s *Orientalism*. See in particular Chapter Three in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

based on ‘natural’ physical and racial differences, and is suggested in comments like ‘tout homme, a dit un sage, est le résumé de sa race’ (p. 157).⁵⁵

However, Marcel’s temperament reveals another side of Decadence. In short, there seems to be two different kinds of Decadence in *L’Opium*: the primitive decadence of an entire race; and the metaphysical decadence of the *fin-de-siècle* generation, that is to say Eastern and Western Decadences. However, by the end of the novel Eastern Decadence paradoxically becomes ambivalent as it is also defined by Marcel as extremely civilised, in the modern Western sense.⁵⁶ In *L’Opium*, it is in opium smoking that these two views of Decadence meet as the instrument and embodiment of decadent aestheticism. This indeterminacy and constant vacillation over what Decadence means and whom it should be applied to are one of the most compelling aspects of colonial literature of Indochina.

In the beginning, opiate experiences are recounted with the Naturalist ‘goût de l’analyse’ (p. 282) and the scientific ‘psychologie expérimentale’ (p. 292). At the same time, the traditional literature of intoxication is called upon – ‘et des souvenirs de lecture lui revinrent, des pages de Gautier et de Baudelaire, toutes les légendes’ (p. 171) –, only to introduce the theme of disillusionment. Baudelaire’s synaesthesia, the correspondence between the arts, appears for example in the leitmotif of ‘l’harmonie du morceau’ (p. 284), a musical piece gushing out from his opiate dream and which he later tries to recapture in vain. This bookish model and intertextuality soon take a turn towards the *fantastique* in the manner of De Quincey’s opiate hallucinations. De Quincey’s haunting figure of the Malay becomes the Chinese owner of the opium den, Tchang (p. 286 and 291 in particular). We shall see that

⁵⁵ Talking about the relationship between racism and science, Tzvetan Todorov points out that ‘today, a distinction is made between racism, which is a ubiquitous form of behaviour, and racialism, or theories of race, whose heyday extended from the middle of the eighteenth through the middle of the twentieth centuries’ (‘“Race,” Writing, and Culture’, *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (1986), 171-81 (p. 173)). He connects the nineteenth-century racialists to Enlightenment philosophy, before discussing the relationship between racialism, universalism and relativism.

⁵⁶ The difference between two types of Eastern and Western Decadence tends to disappear in Jules Boissière’s *Fumeurs d’opium* as Indochina is portrayed as decadent in the Western modern norm.

this *exotico-fantastique* vein is later exploited extensively within decadent aesthetics by Jules Boissière in *Fumeurs d'opium*. Marcel's opium dream represents the Chinese hatefully as 'son cruel ennemi'. This hatred that Marcel directs against the Chinese businessman as the source of his downfall betrays the bitterness the French generally held against the Chinese as the instigators and disseminators of the opium phenomenon and the *sine qua non* intermediary between the French and the native in the opium trade in the region. At the same time, due to his racial identity, Tchang foreshadows the Chinese pirates Marcel will encounter during the Pacification.

After a series of misunderstandings resulting from Blanche's illness, Blanche asks Marcel to go away far from Hanoi. The last part of the novel opens with two battles against the 'Pavillons noirs' in which Marcel participates under the influence of opium. In between the two battles, he witnessed a murder scene in which two French 'troupiers', after catching two Chinese prisoners, have no choice but to execute them themselves, but lack the resolution to do so. An Arab 'chasseur d'Afrique' passes by on his horse and executes the prisoners with his sabre.⁵⁷ After this summary execution, Marcel comes out of hiding and contemplates their corpses. The realist description of the carcasses (p. 445) is rapidly dismissed, only to give way to an aesthetic, if not perverted, one:

Il n'éprouvait aucun dégoût, envahi de *la volupté de l'horrible*, du plaisir surtout de sentir des choses non senties, profondes. L'Opium lui donnait à vivre plusieurs vies; si d'ailleurs sa raison surnageait par minutes, elle lui apportait seulement *une plus âcre jouissance de l'Horreur* et il s'y baignait, fébrile, dans un accès d'égoïsme splendide. N'avait-il pas assez cher acheté le droit *de se régaler de l'universelle souffrance?* Il aurait aujourd'hui brûlé des villes pour contempler les flammes hérissant la nuit, et fait décapiter de belles esclaves pour voir pâlir leurs seins, moins vibrant à mesure que les carotides essoufflées vident les poumons à morts! (p. 446. My emphasis)

This passage illustrates the way in which opiate intoxication steers Marcel's experience towards Decadence. Horror is naturalistic when the quasi-scientific methods of observation

⁵⁷ The issue of race in the colonial army appears throughout *L'Opium*. the Arab 'chasseur d'Afrique', the 'zéphyre' of Algeria, the 'tirailleurs tonkinois', the 'turcos', the indigenous servants etc. By relegating the murder to the hands of the Arab soldier, Bonnetain not only draws from the Orientalist trope of cruelty associated with Oriental men, but also diverts the responsibility for war crimes from the French.

and experimentation are being deployed. But horror becomes decadent when it feeds into sadistic ‘jouissance’ and voluptuousness. Sexual perversity and attraction to morbidity subvert what the text offers to a primary reading. This ‘jouissance de l’Horreur’ continues to play out in the following scene. Taking refuge in a fort to smoke opium ‘pour noyer son souvenir de la femme sous les épouvantements revécus de la guerre’ (p. 451), Marcel has a vision of ‘la marée sanglante’ formed by the blood of the Chinese (p. 452). The second battle of the day begins and he finds himself caught in the middle of it. Again, ‘une horreur infinie’ (p. 459) is rendered through a realist description in which bodies fall like ‘des sacs de farine’, and the ‘visages’ and ‘regards’ of the dead underscore the violence and absurdity of the war (p. 459-60).

This episode of ‘l’exotisme dans l’Horreur’, to use Marcel’s own terms, ends with the French victory and Marcel’s phantasmagoria. In his *fumerie* after the battle, Marcel associates Egyptian references, ‘chimériques hiéroglyphes’, with those of the Far East, ‘pieuvres idéographiques’ (p. 461). Bonnetain draws upon these Orientalist references like other French travellers to the Far East. Opium is personified as a woman who unites these Orientalist tropes:

elle était le sol étrange, la femme sphinx! Elle consolait Çakya-Mouni de l’Inde perdue! Dans ce Tonkin, morne bâtarde, elle soufflait avec l’haleine de la Chine et des vieilles civilisations, des hordes impériales de soldats aux yeux bridés, des résurrections d’âge morts, les primitives barbaries des cruelles batailles! Mère des grands orgueils, elle développait la personnalité de ces races antiques: quatre cent millions d’hommes grouillaient derrière son écran, considéraient avec un mépris d’ivrogne ce pauvre Occident privé des clés du Paradis! (p. 461-2).

Opium thus provides Indochina with a dual and paradoxical identity: barbaric and civilised at the same time. In other words, because of her opiate wisdom, Indochina can be viewed as ‘decadent’ in the modern sense. An ambiguous image of Indochina as superior to the West, particularly in the spiritual sense, a point we shall develop in Chapter Three, can also be read in this passage. For the protagonist, ‘ce Tonkin bizarre’ with its ‘horreurs asiatiques’ (p. 175) can be perceived only through opium smoke: ‘et soudain alors, il comprit que c’était à travers

ce nuage [d'opium] que toujours, pour la comprendre, il fallait contempler la solennelle Asie' (p. 461). The idea of opium being a means to understand foreign culture is succinctly sketched out in *L'Opium*, although with a less positive turn and without the true curiosity for the foreign culture that would be present in later writings by Boissière and Albert de Pouvourville.

Colonial Decadence or the End of Exoticism?

Opiate contamination not only destabilises the novel's aesthetic take but also, as previously suggested, undermines colonialist discourse. The patriotism that should motivate the colonialist hero becomes the object of disillusionment. Throughout the novel, a tension between Marcel's decadent mindset and his experiences of the French conquest in Tonkin is played out, to the point where decadent aestheticism replaces patriotic heroism: 'non soldat enfin, il assistait aux combats par plaisir, la guerre ayant pour lui l'attrait cruel du jeu' (p. 506 and 557-8).

A decadent reading of *L'Opium* points to the changing direction in literary aesthetics during the period when the first imagery of Indochina was being constructed. When combined with exoticism and colonialism, decadent excess ends up transforming the text into an assemblage of contesting, if not contradictory, discourses, oscillating between patriotic and imperialist propaganda, colonial exoticism and a nihilistic denunciation of all worldly engagement. On one level, as Christophe Charle points out, in contrast to Bonnetain's essays of the same period, *Au Tonkin* (1884) and *Le Monde pittoresque et monumental, l'Extrême-Orient* (1887) in which he 'fait ouvertement de la propagande pour la colonisation du Tonkin en cours', *L'Opium* presents 'un plaidoyer implicite pour une politique plus énergique' because it proposes 'la peinture assez négative de la politique coloniale officielle'.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Christophe Charle, 'Exotisme colonial et stratégie littéraire: l'exemple de Paul Bonnetain', *Komparatistische Hefte*, 3 (1981), 28-36 (p. 32).

Without completely dismissing Bonnetain's revisionist position in relation to colonial politics, what is of interest in the literary construction of Indochina in *L'Opium* is the epistemological problematic Bonnetain introduces: a decadent Indochina that can offer nothing different from decadent Europe:

Ainsi c'était cela?... [...] Voilà! L'Opium, dont on parlait tant, ne valait pas plus que le reste!... Comme aussi cette Indo-Chine, où des laideurs européennes s'accouplaient dans la fange avec les misères locales et des dégradations invétérées! La civilisation? un échange de vices!... On voyageait pourtant afin de sortir du déjà vu!... (p. 183)

Bonnetain's Indochina reflects an Indochina commodified for a metropolitan readership, with metropolitan preoccupations and questions. The new exotic Orient is revealed to be a mirror of the West, as echoed in the leitmotif of the mirror. Taking this colonial exoticism literally, Segalen dismissively names Bonnetain one of the 'proxénètes de la sensation du divers' alongside Jean Ajalbert.⁵⁹

However, the irony and self-parody deployed by the decadent aesthetics yield the potential for self-reflexivity in both the political and aesthetic realms. I wish to argue further that *L'Opium* can also be read as a reflection of, or at least as betraying the incapacity and limits of the French engagement with radical otherness. This failure of exoticism expressed through the permeating sense of belatedness is symptomatic of the perceived sentiment of global homogenization that reached its peak at the *fin de siècle*.⁶⁰ In relation to the opium theme, Théophile Gautier is among the first to announce the sentiment of *belatedness* and its correlative question of *inauthenticity* in *Constantinople* (1853) when evoking the Turks he encounters in the 'bazar des armes'. Gautier identifies 'les extases de L'Opium' as one of the 'physiognomic' signs of the 'Turc pur sang' and nostalgically laments their gradual extinction: 'cet aspect du Turc pur sang *qui tend à disparaître, ce qu'il faudra bientôt aller chercher au fond de l'Asie*'.⁶¹ As such, *L'Opium* represents not a realist 'peinture de la vie française

⁵⁹ Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, p. 22.

⁶⁰ C. W. Thompson, *French Romantic Travel Writing*, p. 391-394.

⁶¹ Théophile Gautier, *Constantinople* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1853), p. 130. My emphasis.

pendant les premiers jours de l'occupation, dans les scènes, où, pour la première fois, sont montrées les réalités quotidiennes d'un monde colonial commençant, dans les jolis paysages où est évoquée la monotone et toujours verte physionomie du Tonkin';⁶² but rather an attempt at articulating the epistemological limits felt by many decadent writers during the period of high imperialism, the advent of mass tourism and the emergence of a new global capitalist order. The tensions between Naturalism and Decadence can thus be seen as attesting to this dilemma between the desire for and reaction against exoticism at the *fin de siècle*. Colonial Decadence, as it emerges in *L'Opium*, yields its inherent political nature as 'critical Decadence' which criticises the modern conditions as well as Decadence's own derivative and hackneyed nature.

JULES BOISSIERE'S 'CRITICAL DECADENCE'

'chef d'œuvre, intermédiaire entre la réalité et le rêve,
et qui rend l'intensité du rêve'⁶³

Whilst he embarked for Tonkin in 1886 as part of the entourage of Paul Bert⁶⁴ as a civil servant, Jules Boissière (1863-1897) (Figure 3) began his military career in the infantry of the 11th *bataillon de chasseurs à pied*. He later learned to speak Vietnamese and to read Chinese, the language in which most of Vietnamese philosophy and literature were written. Having discovered opium, he published in Hanoi *Le Bonze Khou-Su* and *Propos d'un intoxiqué* in 1890, under the pseudonyms of Jean Rodde and Khou-Mi respectively.⁶⁵ Prior to his Indochinese sojourn, he had published two books of poetry, *Devant l'énigme* (1883) and *Provensa!* (1886), with the renowned Parnassian publisher Lemerre. This suggests that he had connections with

⁶² Anatole France in *Le Temps* of the 2nd September 1886, quoted by Frédéric Da Silva, 'Lettres de Paul Bonnetain à Émile Zola', *Les Cahiers naturalistes*, 85 (2011), 15-38 (p. 20).

⁶³ Léon Daudet's comment on *Fumeurs d'opium* in *L'Homme et le poison* (Paris: Nouvelle librairie nationale, 1925), p. 107. He also compares Boissière's work to Paul Bonnetain's *L'Opium* which he considered 'raté'.

⁶⁴ A zoologist, physiologist and politician close to Gambetta, Paul Bert (1833-1886) was appointed resident-general of Annam and Tonkin in 1886, where he died of dysentery the same year.

⁶⁵ The two texts were re-published with the short stories 'Terre de fièvre' and 'Cahier de route' with a preface by Jean Ajalbert under the title *Propos d'un intoxiqué* in 1911 by Louis Michaud.

Parisian avant-garde circles. Between the two publications, he worked in Paris for *La Justice*, a radical socialist newspaper founded by Clemenceau. In 1891, he returned to France for a vacation before going back again to Indochina in 1892 where he was appointed director of the soon-to-be launched *Revue indochinoise* (August-October 1893). He went back again for a *congé* in France, taking with him the manuscript of *Fumeurs d'opium* which was to be published by Flammarion in 1896. In March 1896, he returned to Tonkin and was appointed to take charge of civil service at the general secretariat and later special secretary to the general secretary. He died in Hanoi at the age of thirty-four in 1897 of an intestinal disease from which he had long been suffering.

Fumeurs d'opium (1896)⁶⁶ is a collection of seven short stories set at the time of the French conquest of Indochina between 1885 and 1896. This was a period of unrest when the future of French imperialism in the region was uncertain. The stories offer the most vivid and intriguing literary images of opium. Although admired by overseas French writers and well known among a limited number of European critics and writers (including Jean Lorrain, Léon Daudet, Oscar Wilde and Victor Segalen among others),⁶⁷ it was not until the posthumous edition of 1910— in the context of heated debates about opium on the international scene —⁶⁸ that the pioneering value of Boissière's texts became more widely recognised.

⁶⁶ Jules Boissière, *Fumeurs d'opium* (Paris: Kailash Editions, [1896] 2005). Re-published posthumously in 1909 by L. Michaud in Paris under the supervision of his widow Thérèse Roumanille, Jean Ajalbert, Alfred de Pouvoirville and the Comité des Français d'Asie, this collection of short stories was praised as a 'chef d'oeuvre' by Alfred Droin. A brief biography of Jules Boissière can be consulted in 'Dictionnaire des auteurs', *Indochine: un rêve d'Asie*, pp. 987-88. The seven stories are, respectively, 'Dans la forêt', 'La prise de Lang-Xi', 'Comédiens ambulants', 'Le blockhaus incendié', 'Les Génies du mont Tân-Vien', 'Carnet d'un troupier', 'Une âme. Journal d'un fusillé'.

⁶⁷ Cario and Régismanset call *Fumeurs d'opium* 'cet admirable livre, un des plus purs chefs-d'œuvre de la littérature française, qui porte, comme épigraphe, une citation du *Corbeau* d'Edgar Allan Poe et qui est lourd de beauté secrète, éternelle' (*L'Exotisme: la littérature coloniale*, p. 114).

⁶⁸ After the International Conference in Shanghai in 1909, an international convention would be voted for during the Hague conference in 1911 in an attempt to control the production, trade and consumption of opium, morphine and cocaine. Hence, following the steps taken earlier by Anglo-Saxon countries, France adopted 'la loi du 12 juillet 1916' against 'les stupéfiants' (Butel, *L'Opium: histoire d'une fascination*, pp. 300-1). This law was received negatively by those in the pharmaceutical profession, as they considered it against their practice. A number of artists were also against it, including Anthonin Artaud, Claude Farrère and Victor Segalen. Segalen

The first short story of the volume, ‘Dans la forêt’, recounts the fatal destiny of a French treasure hunter. It is the only one – out of the six stories having a French hero as the main character – that does not feature a soldier. This introductory ‘tale’ provides a point of entry into Boissière’s *fantastique* universe, laying out many of the problematics we will see in the other two stories under discussion, albeit in a different register. The second part of our analysis will focus on ‘Comédiens ambulants’, the only story in which a native character is the protagonist, and which is compellingly unique in several respects as will become clear. The last and longest story, of eighty pages, ‘Une âme. Journal d’un fusillé’, depicts the journey of a French decadent soldier whose opiate addiction *decivilizes* him in such an inexorable way that he crosses to the enemy’s side.

As the title of the collection suggests, the protagonists, regardless of their racial identity or socio-cultural attributes, are all opium smokers. Although they are set in the dangerous ‘zone de guerre’, it is opium that brings the stories to focus on the tensions between the aesthetic individualism of decadent discourse and the political realities of the violence of colonialism, the latter not always evident but suggested, if not camouflaged behind aestheticist décor and attitude. Boissière’s short stories are imbued with a complex decadent exoticism that engages directly with political questions far removed from any mere ‘exoticism’ or apparent aloofness characteristic of metropolitan Decadence. In addition, the form of the *nouvelle*, rarely paired with Decadence in academic discussions, as pointed out in the preface of the recently published *The Decadent Short Story*, emerges as one of the defining characteristics of Indochinese Decadence, contributing to the mapping out of the generic and aesthetic territory of ‘travelling’ Decadence.⁶⁹

published the article ‘La paix à l’opium’ in *Mercure de France* of the 1st December 1906 as a response to Jean Ajalbert’s article against opium, ‘La guerre à l’opium’, published in *Le Matin* (5th October 1906).

⁶⁹ *The Decadent Short Story: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by Kostas Boyiopoulos, Yoonjoung Choi, and Matthew Brinton Tildesley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 1. Although the remark on the short story and Decadence pertains to English academic studies, the same can be said of the French counterparts.

The Exotico-*Fantastique* Decadence in ‘Dans la forêt’

‘Dans la forêt’ is set in a deep and mysterious tropical forest in the Northeastern part of Indochina, between the fertile delta of Tonkin and the hitherto inhospitable China. It is the story of a young French adventurer, ‘joyeux et hardi’, who flees ‘la vieille Europe’ for the dangers of ‘la brousse de Bornéo’ and ends up in Indochina equipped with ‘une vieille carte annamite’ in search of an old gold mine (p. 9-10). Drawing on the popular genre of ‘roman d’aventures’ à la Jules Verne with a recognisable plot reminiscent of H. Rider Haggard’s *King of Solomon’s Mines* (1885) set in Africa, Boissière’s short story can be regarded as the first *Indochinese* adventure tale.

The tropical forest reaching ‘du Delta tonkinois à l’immensurable et flottante frontière du Kouang-Si’ (p. 9) is presented from the outset as an exotic floating space where the heroic prowess of the white adventurer can be demonstrated: ‘la sombre forêt indéfinie’, ‘mystérieuse’, ‘impénétrable’ (p. 9-10). However, trapped in this ‘terre mortelle’ (p. 12), the narrator-protagonist is waiting for his imminent death. The topos of the forest as a fatal confinement is reflected in the circularity of the story, which begins and ends with the threat of death. The last sentence (p. 22) echoes an image of a venomous snake – ‘une couleuvre’ – evoked earlier in the story (p. 19). This looming shadow not only symbolises all the threats associated with the forest – malaria (p. 13), poisonous animals, air and soil –, but also foreshadows the final threat posed by the ‘Génie Ba-Truc’, a respected and feared spirit protector of the land and the gold mine. In the climatic scene, the spirit makes an apparition and kills the protagonist’s aide, another European character, le sieur Roux.⁷⁰

The tragic adventure of the protagonist is accompanied, but most importantly triggered, by opium smoking. Under the influence of ‘la noire drogue’ (p. 21), his lucidity and fear alternately motivate the narrative, creating a heavy atmosphere of psychological distress

⁷⁰ The name Le Roux may be an allusion to Hugues Le Roux (1860-1925), author of travelogues and colonial novels set in African.

concomitant to an increasingly disturbing menace from the forest. The trope of the fatal forest characteristic of the adventure novel is thus redefined by the trope of opium smoking which in turn reorients the story towards a ‘conte fantastique’. It is undoubtedly in this capacity that Boissière is called the ‘Edgar Allan Poe indochinois’ by the critics Marius-Ary Leblond.⁷¹ His writing is contemporary with the re-emergence of the *fantastique* in the last quarters of the century after its first French heyday during the Romantic period in the 1830s-40s.⁷² Opium used as a narrative strategy for exotico-*fantastique* escape is not new, but explored in Théophile Gautier’s *La Pipe d’opium* (1838). In picking up on Gautier’s Romantic combination of the opium theme with the motifs of dream, Boissière however recasts it into a decadent ‘conte exotico-fantastique’, combining Indochinese exoticism with decadent aesthetics and, less expectedly, with colonial preoccupations.

At first, opiate intoxication enhances his senses and opens up his consciousness to the ‘mystères épars dans tous les êtres et dans toutes les choses’ (p. 12 and 21). It appears as a means through which the protagonist can ‘penetrate’ the secret of the forest (‘ayant fumé, je comprenais mieux la forêt’ (p. 15)), thus reaffirming his identity as a virile conqueror who penetrates into uncharted land, an identity that he had established during his previous adventure into the forest of Borneo. But soon enough, ‘les rêves et la science enclose dans la bonne pipe’ (p. 13) combined with the native’s ‘effroyables superstitions’ (p. 12), ‘très antiques formules magiques’ (p. 15) and ‘terrifiantes légendes’ (p. 16) yield a disturbing atmosphere of ‘indéfinissable terreur’ (p. 19). The active adventurer in search of regeneration

⁷¹ Leblond, *Écrits sur la littérature coloniale*, pp. 32-3.

⁷² For a structuralist study of *littérature fantastique*, see Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, [1970] 1976). For the reader-response theory, see Gary Cumiskey, *The Changing Face of Horror: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century French Fantastic Short Story* (New York: Peter Lang ‘Age of Revolution and Romanticism’, 1992). For a study of the *fantastique* genre in literary history, see Marcel Schneider, *Histoire de la littérature fantastique en France* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), Jean-Baptiste Baronian, *Panorama de la littérature fantastique de langue française* (Paris: Stock, 1978), Jean Pierrot, ‘Merveilleux et fantastique: une histoire de l’imaginaire dans la prose française du Romantisme à la décadence (1830-1900)’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de Paris IV, 1975), and Pierre Georges Castex, *Le Conte fantastique en France de Nodier à Maupassant* (Paris: J. Corti, 1951). In this chapter, the French term *fantastique* will be mainly used to refer to this particular literary development in France.

far away from a decadent Europe is transformed into a decadent aesthete by opium. Like Bonnetain's protagonist, his heightened hypersensitivity and intellectual refinement provoked by opiate intoxication (p. 9 and 12) paradoxically renders him indifferent and in 'l'absolue inertie' (p. 21) at times, while at other times, he is seized with terror by bestial, 'végétal' (p. 16) and spectral nightmares (p. 15). This inhuman menace, qualified as 'l'horreur mystique de la forêt' (p. 16) in a reminiscence of Bonnetain's 'l'exotisme dans l'Horreur', and epitomises in an even more hallucinatory manner the figures of the Malay and the Chinese in De Quincey's and Bonnetain's opiate dreams.

One of the most vivid scenes pertaining to this *fantastique* opiate dream is the arrival of the exploratory expedition at the pagoda of the Génie Ba-Truc, 'temple poussiéreux caché dans un bosquet de banyans' (p. 17). The sacred aspects of the 'temple' terrify the addict-adventurer who knows by heart the indigenous legend about the fierceness of the guardian of the gold mine. The image of the spider's webs inside the cave, repeated twice (p. 17-18), foreshadows the assault on le Roux by the spirit. The fatal attack by 'l'Ombre maudite' (p. 22) is described as 'comme une toile d'araignée sur deux insectes' (p. 21). For the contemporary reader the image of the tropical forest invading the temple undoubtedly evokes Henri Mouhot's (1826-1861) famous depiction and sketches of Angkor Wat (Figures 4 & 5) in his posthumous 'Voyage dans les royaumes de Siam, de Cambodge, de Laos, et autres parties centrales de l'Indo-Chine' (1863).⁷³ The story of the adventurer in search of a lost gold mine can be related to the legend of Henri Mouhot in search of a lost ancient site. Similarly, Mouhot's legendary death caused by malaria in Laos not only models the adventurer's end, but it also uncannily foreshadows Boissière's premature demise in Hanoi.

⁷³ Henri Mouhot was a French naturalist who received support from the British Royal Geographical Society and the Zoological Society of London for a zoological mission to Indochina in 1858. He died of malaria fever in 1861, near Luang Prabang in Laos, where the French erected a tomb in his honour. Although he was not the first European to visit the ancient capital of the Khmer civilisation, his vivid evocation of the ruins exerted an enduring influence on popular imagination, as we shall see in Chapter Three.

On one level, the insistence on decomposition, ‘corruptions’, ‘pourritures’ (p. 13) highlights the lethal and malarial character of the land.⁷⁴ On another, the decomposing forest and its immaterial dwellers function as metonyms for the decadence of Indochina and the antique and degenerate character of its people (‘les âmes crépusculaires’ (p. 12)). Their ‘longue hérédité’ (p. 15) partly understood at the *fin de siècle* as the sign and cause of degeneration provides them with a mystical connection – considered at once primitive and superior to the Western mind – with the immaterial, be it animalistic or supranatural. This motif of antique and bestial connection finds its fullest expression in Claude Farrère’s female protagonist in ‘Les bêtes’, examined later in this chapter.

However, this exotic primitivism is evoked with awareness of its ethnic complexity, which complicates the longstanding ahistorical view of Indochina. Within the expedition corps there is a tension between the hill-tribe ‘*Thôls à dents jaunes*’ portrayed as primitive and superstitious (p. 11) and the ‘sceptiques’ (p. 16) Annamites from the delta who consider the former ‘les pires sorciers’ in line with the modern rationalist view. From this inter-ethnic confrontation, Indochina comes to be seen as primitive and contemporary, ahistorical and historical at the same time. This ambiguity, already seen in Bonnetain’s novel in his representation of Indochinese Decadence, reflects the conflation of the two Orientals as laid out by the Hegelian historicist theory of civilisations. Located in respect of its geography and civilisation between India and China, *Indo-chine* is represented as collapsing ‘le partage entre un Orient de l’histoire – fût-ce celui de la décadence – et un Orient du rêve, très souvent relégué dans la lointaine Asie’.⁷⁵ In other words, according to decadent historicism, Indochina

⁷⁴ The nineteenth century understood that malaria (*mala aria*) was caused by an air infected with ‘les miasmes palustres’ and ‘diverses sortes d’émanations végétales et animales’ (see the entry ‘malaria’ in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales*, ed. by Amédée Dechambre and others (Paris: G. Masson and P. Asselin, 1874-1889), vol. 4, 2nd series, p. 332).

⁷⁵ Moura, ‘L’(Extrême-)Orient selon G. W. F. Hegel’, 31-42 (p. 35). In this article, Jean-Marc Moura points out ‘deux “types” de formations orientales’ in Hegel’s philosophy of history. The first is the *Hinterasien*: the Far East or Eastern Orient (China and Mongolia) as representing the world of the patriarchal innocence, ‘un empire immuable, ahistorique’. The second is the *Vorderasien*: the Middle East and Central Asia (Persian Empire and Egypt). Having entered the historical realm, the latter started to develop a nascent subjectivity and to be complicated by certain contradictions. India occupied an ambiguous position within this binary opposition: it

is posited simultaneously as being at the end of an ancient civilisation (the image of crepuscule and decadence) and at the beginning of history (primitive in relation to an ideology of progress). This ambiguity in the imagery of Indochina as a *potpourri*, within which all the Orientals known to the West are intermingled, reflects the instability of French knowledge of the newly discovered colony.

At the same time, what underpins this decadent exotico-*fantastique* tale is the historical context embedded within the colonial wars. The ruins of the *Thô*s villages and their ‘perpétuelle anxiété d’être recrutés comme coolies⁷⁶ par les pirates ou par nos convois’ (p. 11) plunge the reader back into the reality of the Pacification in which there are only victims, and perhaps no real hero. Indeed, the apparent ‘immensurable et flottante’ (p. 9) forest, an exotic space par excellence, embodies the fluid character of the Sino-Indochinese borders in Boissière’s time. In line with the indigenous premodern conceptions of space, the area between the high land of Haut-Tonkin and Southern China was a frontier space of shared sovereignty. Ill-defined, it was problematic insofar as bandits and pirates could cross the borders at ease. Opium formed part of the merchandise moving through these invisible borders, which the French tried to control by military means, the economic measures of the ‘Régie de l’opium’, and the modern technologies of map-making.⁷⁷

The supernatural spirit, ‘Génie Ba-Truc’, who takes Le Roux’s life, embodies the national pride and resistance dismissed by the French as absent, or at best, characterised by the dismissive term, ‘pirates’. A mandarin during his lifetime, Ba-Truc administered the

was thought of as a mediation between the two Orientals, but was grouped nevertheless with the Chinese. While Persia operated a transition towards Greek civilisation, which was perceived as the foundation of Western progress, India represented a failure in its attempt to reach the goal of absolute subjectivity.

⁷⁶ *Le Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* gives a definition of the term ‘coolie’: ‘Nom donné aux Indiens, aux Chinois et aux Asiatiques qui s’engagent, moyennant salaire, pour aller travailler dans une colonie européenne.’ (See entry ‘coolie’, Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle: français, historique, géographique, mythologique, bibliographique*, 17 vols (Paris: Administration du grand Dictionnaire universel, 1866-1877), vol. 5.

⁷⁷ Many treaties the French signed with rulers of different countries in the region partly consisted of forming a joint committee that would explore and draw up maps of the region in order to delineate territories and borders. For the indigenous conceptions of space, see in particular Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

region in the name of the king of Annam. According to the inscription of the royal decree next to the statue of the *Génie* inside the pagoda, the king ordered that after the mandarin's death, he was to protect the land from exploitation (p. 17-18). The protagonist's adoption of the supernatural explanation for Le Roux' death (instead of a natural death caused by an opium addiction) betrays his recognition of indigenous resistance. A nationalist narrative is thus concealed under legends and folklore for easy transmission across the regions and from generation to generation. This oral (hi)story camouflaged under a premodern supernatural literary form thus operates as a repository of national memory at a time of foreign invasion.

Hence, the forest in 'Dans la forêt' is multi-layered: it is an exotico-*fantastique* space, ahistorical par excellence; yet, embedded in colonial wars, it is undeniably historical and political. As such, Boissière not only differentiates 'Dans la forêt' from Romantic *fantastique* but also from the conventional decadent *fantastique* itself which has generally been considered to relish aestheticism and individualism.⁷⁸

'Comédiens ambulants': Death and Beauty in the Kaleidoscopic Massacre

The second longest short story, at sixty-six pages, 'Comédiens ambulants' stands apart because the main character, unlike the protagonists of the other six stories, is a young and graceful Annamite mandarin. All the other characters are also Annamite; there is not a single European presence. This narrative technique of writing through the native's eyes⁷⁹ was unusual among literary texts related to the French colonies, either Indochina or other regions, at the time of *Fumeurs d'opium*. For Indochina, this technique is used in Pouvourville's

⁷⁸ Jean-Baptiste Baronian calls the decadent *fantastique* 'le fantastique "fin de siècle"' and concludes his chapter by pointing out that 'les "décadents" apparaissent comme les hérauts de l'individualisme, les champions de l'aristocratie culturelle', and Decadence 'apparaît comme une magnifique échappée vers les zones de l'imaginaire, fût-ce dans de nombreux cas, par des moyens sophistiqués.' (*Panorama de la littérature fantastique de langue française*, pp. 146-7).

⁷⁹ In her article, Denise Brahimi proposes to categorise the 'roman exotique' into two groups: on one hand, 'l'Aventure du voyageur', in which the story is narrated through the eyes of the European hero, with Fromentin and Pierre Loti as models, and on the other, 'Les Autres parlent' with Segalen and Flaubert as models. She analyses the narrative and stylistic challenges and problems posed by both categories and offers an alternative category as a synthesis of the two, namely the 'roman initiaque'. See Denise Brahimi, 'Enjeux et risques du roman exotique français', in *Cahiers CRLH-CIRAOI* (Paris: Didier, 1988), pp. 11-18.

L'Annam sanglant (1890), and almost two decades later in Jean Ajalbert's *Sao Van Di* (1905), Émile Nolly's *Hiên le Maboul* (1908) and *La Barque Annamite* (1910).⁸⁰ From this perspective, Segalen's *Les Immémoriaux* (1907), which has been widely praised by literary critics as the model of an innovative narrative strategy, in contrast to the conventional strategy exploited by authors of exotic novels like Pierre Loti, seems to draw on initiatives undertaken earlier by the two colonial authors. Indeed, the young Segalen praises Boissière's *Fumeurs d'opium* as 'un livre merveilleux [...] À cent lieues devant Bonnetain'.⁸¹

The story begins with a travelling opera troupe wandering about at the frontier of North Vietnam in the 'solitudes de la frontière chinoise' (p. 35). The 'Comédiens ambulants' comprise 'onze pauvres hères d'Annam – chanteurs, musiciens, bateleurs' (p. 35), with Vien the sage-poet and *devin* as their leader and Thi-Teu, the talented opera singer as their star. After a long and exhausting journey, they arrive in front of the gate of a village guarded by vigilantes. The name of the village is May-Xê and its head 'le grand chef Dôc-Liêt' (p. 46), the renowned mandarin whom 'tout le monde croyait [...] réfugié par-delà la frontière en Chine' (p. 57). Brought into the presence of the chef, Thi-Teu falls in love with him, although she strategically acts disrespectful and insolent (p. 53). The opera troupe stays in the village; they are fed sumptuously and treated like royalty. They perform their show during 'huit jours de fêtes et d'orgies que domine l'élégante silhouette du chef affable et hautain' (p. 74). A love triangle begins between Vien, Thi-Teu and Dôc-Liêt. Vien, the old sage, is in love with Thi-Teu. It is a spiritual and transcendental kind of love. Thi-Teu, convinced of her beauty and grace, tries to seduce Dôc-Liêt by feigning coldness. The latter, at first indifferent and disdainful, confesses his secret desire on the second night 'sous le voile des poésies remémorées' (p. 77). The following day, she falls into his arms. But aloof and decadent, Dôc-

⁸⁰ Louis Malleret recognised this significant aspect in Boissière: 'Si l'on met à part les écrits de Jules Boissière et ceux d'Albert de Pouvourville [...] l'on ne voit pas que les livres parus entre 1890 et 1910 nous aient beaucoup appris sur la mentalité des Jaunes.' (*L'Exotisme indochinois*, vol. 2, p. 74).

⁸¹ Lettre à Émile Mignard, du 6 mai 1902, quoted in Gilles Manceron, *Segalen* (Paris: J.-C. Lattès, 1991), p. 504.

Liêt consummates their love as an aesthetic and mystical experience. On the eighth night, the troupe performs the last show before leaving the village. At the end of the spectacle, Dôc-Liêt orders them to be decapitated and retreats back to his reading on the transience of all beings.

Imbued with a luxuriant Indochinese atmosphere, ‘Comédiens ambulants’ is an equivocal tale that can be read on two overlapping levels, using the trope of opium as the vantage point. On one level, Boissière excels in weaving the epitome of exotic aestheticism *à l’Indochinoise*, creating a poetic dreamlike tale, entwined with decadent perversity. To do so, he draws on references from the French *fin-de-siècle* tradition in the literary and visual arts and realigns them with unmatched knowledge of Indochinese culture and wisdom to create a *conte merveilleux* in the *Arabian Nights* manner. On another level, in belonging to both the realms of dream and history, opium allows an alternative narrative to emerge at the heart of chimerical exoticism. This evokes reflections concerning decadent historicism, cultural relativism and official colonial discourse.

The opening lines of the tale introduce readers to a narrator who identifies himself on the same side as the European reader (*Fumeurs d’opium* was first published by Flammarion), while adopting the position of the *conteur* who can penetrate Indochinese souls due to his profound knowledge of the region: ‘Elle ne meurt pas la race des dieux. – Au crépuscule de notre monde ils surgissent encore en de lumineuses effigies, pour reprendre parmi la foule transitoire les luttes de leurs impérissables passions’ (p. 35). The image of the declining sun (‘crépuscule’) immediately aligns Indochina and its people – ‘la race des dieux’ refers to the self-portrait of the Annamite – with decadent historicism and the clichéd image of decadent sunsets. Eastern doctrines of transience and reincarnation in the Buddhist tradition (‘sous les multiples déguisements des incarnations’) are also evoked in terms of the renunciation of strong passions, introducing the perpetual struggle between mystico-spiritual yearning and desire as the main Indochinese trait.

The *merveilleux*, according to Jean Pierrot, ‘sera lié à la survivance d’éléments irrationnels dans différentes mentalités, mentalités primitives ou l’univers de l’enfance, ou encore à l’abandon par l’homme moderne de son attitude rationaliste dans certaines circonstances’.⁸² The *merveilleux* is the main trait of fairy tales, legends, exotic stories, utopian narratives, myths, fables and also passages in ‘littérature moderne’ whenever ‘l’aventure sera rattachée à l’univers du rêve ou à celui de la drogue’.⁸³ The portrait of the cruel but beguiling mandarin and his entourage is underpinned by the characteristic view of the *conte merveilleux* that there exists the ‘survivance d’éléments irrationnels’ forming part of Indochinese everyday reality. However, it is not the ‘irrational’ elements per se that govern the atmosphere here, but rather another worldview presented as completely different from the European one.

Immemorial legends and the belief in cyclic temporality, underpinned by the Buddhist tradition of successive reincarnations of the soul before the ultimate awakening, infuse the description of the scenery and transform not only the objective world of nature but also the perceptions of the characters (p. 43). The characters converse in poetry, transforming the *conte* into a kind of exotic prose poem⁸⁴ with usage of native terms typographically highlighted by italics throughout the narrative. Hence, this is the world of exotic aestheticism and refinement, situated in a heroic and epic time as will be discussed later.

More importantly, the *merveilleux* is rendered through the interplay between exoticism and decadent aesthetics, between Indochinese elements and metropolitan *fin-de-siècle* intertextuality, particularly played out in the morbid characterisation of the main character Dôc-Liêt and his surroundings. Dôc-Liêt is a charismatic Indochinese Des Esseintes, a ‘lettré

⁸² Pierrot, ‘Merveilleux et fantastique’, pp. 7-8.

⁸³ Pierrot, pp. 34-35.

⁸⁴ Jean Pierrot points out that the *merveilleux* has a close relationship with poetry. In both, ‘l’imaginaire affirme sa suprématie, et transforme le monde objectif ou plutôt détruit la barrière qui existe aux yeux du rationalisme entre objectif et subjectif’ (p. 39).

fameux' whose 'légende courait au pays d'Annam, et jusqu'en terre chinoise' (p. 48). A cultivated aristocrat, the gracious eighteen-year-old mandarin described as 'l'Unique, avec la jeunesse immortelle et la beauté non périssable des héros' (p. 53) is born to be a leader: 'armé de l'inexplicable attrait qui désigne aux hommes l'homme né pour commander' (p. 58). He reigns over a group of militia in this village. At the same time, in line with the decadent portrait, 'le doux éphèbe dompteur des hommes' (p. 59) is also portrayed as androgynous with frail and feminine traits. He is living a decadent life *par excellence*: 'une vie paresseuse [...] une vie de luxe, de puissance et de méditation, magnifiés par la magie de L'Opium' (p. 65).

Dôc-Liêt reigns over his subjects from the *fumerie* where he constructs his own *paradis artificiel* in which scents, senses and colours converse and enhance one another synaesthetically with 'un hautain mépris du monde extérieur' (p. 62-5). Enveloped in opium smoke, he meditates, reads and dreams in vivid kaleidoscopic images:

las de lire et de méditer, il laisse sa rêverie errer à travers le monde papillotant des souvenirs, – à l'heure où, filles de la fumée, essaient et bourdonnent sous la crâne des idées sans lien, pareilles aux *fugitives images du kaléidoscope*. Elle flottent éparées, puis – miracle de L'Opium! – s'harmonisent en *tableaux brillants, parfumés et sonores*. [...] Thi-Teu reparaisait en les successifs paysages du songe [...] *paysages de symboles*, où les parfums sont transposés en sentiments et les couleurs en idées (p. 81-82. My emphasis)

The world of symbols, formed by mirages and synaesthesia, resembles a vivid painting. This imagery is influenced not only by Baudelaire's *correspondances*, but also by the *Wagnérisme* in vogue among avant-garde artists at the end of the nineteenth century.⁸⁵ We can also read here a transposition between art techniques – music, painting, literature –, which is one of the literary devices of Decadence.⁸⁶

Imagination and dream become the preferred source from which reality stems inasmuch as the only world that exists is projected and shaped by internal desires. Reality

⁸⁵ Smith, 'Concepts of Decadence in Nineteenth-Century French Literature', 640-51 (p. 646).

⁸⁶ Richard Wagner (1813-1883) was elevated to the status of a cult figure in Paris during the 1880s-90s by the young Symbolists and Decadents. See the discussion on Wagner and Nietzsche's reception and influences in France during the *fin de siècle* (Christopher E. Forth, 'Nietzsche, Decadence, and Regeneration in France, 1891-95', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 54 (1993), 97-117 (p. 100)).

thus belongs to the realm of illusion. Although Dôc-Liêt's ultimate disdain for the world of *apparences* seems to be in harmony with Buddhist and Confucian wisdom as understood by the West, this worldview can also be traced back to the epigraph from Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's prose story, 'le Tueur de cygnes' (p. 35), mentioned at the beginning of the story.⁸⁷ Rejecting the period's positivist and scientific pretensions to attain objective reality, Villiers's *Idéalisme* views the world as a projection of individual consciousness. Boissière's epigraph is significant inasmuch as it sheds light on Dôc-Liêt's morbid fetishism. The perverse mandarin presents a parallel with Villier's (anti-)hero as both Tribulat Bonhomet's alter ego and his opposite. Bonhomet is a bourgeois materialist who kills the swans to hear their song after reading about the myth in natural history; the mandarin is a decadent aesthete with 'l'âme éprise de symboles' (p. 94) who kills the singers after their singing to savour the scene as a work of art.

The final massacre is staged as a theatrical *mise en abyme*, an opera within the opera in tune with idealist philosophy. This 'tableau miraculeux' which 'il entrevit dans les fumées d'opium' epitomises 'cette apothéose radieuse et triste, enfin réalisé, de la Mort et la Beauté' (p. 97). It promises the instigator 'une neuve jouissance, une volupté plus poignante que l'amour, un de ces spectacles – or, soie et sang – dont il s'enivra, dans la fumée des pipes, entre les pages éternelles des sages' (p. 90). The sixteen-year-old opera singer, 'la vierge' Thi-Teu, dressed up by the prince in luxurious cloths and ornaments is celebrated for the 'illusoires apparences' her costume creates (p. 75). The influence of Baudelaire's 'Éloge du maquillage' can be read in this sublimation of the artifice of makeup.⁸⁸ This female 'baladine'

⁸⁷ Tribulat Bonhomet is an iconic character created by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam in 1867. He is an archetype reflecting his century, a subject for ridicule and satire, yet at the same time Villiers' alter ego. He appeared in the story *Claire Lenoir* which Villiers de l'Isle Adam called a 'conte terrible' in his letter to Mallarmé of 11 September 1866. *Claire Lenoir* was published serially in *Revue des lettres et des arts* in 1867. It was not until 1886 that the bourgeois Bonhomet reappeared again in *Le Tueur de cygnes* in the review *Le Chat Noir*. Later in 1887, *Le Tueur de cygnes* was published alongside other *contes* in which Bonhomet is the main protagonist under the title *Tribulat Bonhomet*. For a study on the character of Bonhomet, see C. A. Hackett, 'Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Tribulat Bonhomet', *The Modern Language Review*, 78 (1983), 804-15.

⁸⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard 'La Pléiade', 1975), vol. 1, pp. 714-18.

is represented throughout the story as a graceful *femme fatale* whose operatic dance and singing invokes the highly popular *fin-de-siècle* myth of Salomé. The biblical myth of the Judean princess had become a ‘cultural obsession’: writers and artists of the *fin de siècle* often featured her in their oriental evocations.⁸⁹ The paintings and sketches of Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) on the subject, which amount to hundreds, depict a sumptuous and mysterious décor à l’orientale, in particular Salomé’s jewels and garments (Figure 6). Moreau was unanimously praised as a *maître* by the *fin-de-siècle* artistic circle, from the Parnassians to the Decadents and Symbolists.⁹⁰ In line with Segalen’s view of Moreau as a ‘poète merveilleux’ despite his reserve, critics often observed that Moreau’s paintings were similar to the visions of opium smokers.⁹¹ Thi-Teu’s dangerous sexuality and jewelled performance attire are arguably reminiscent of Moreau’s Salomé while feeding an Indochinese literary version into this myth, particularly through the little known yet significant effects provoked in the *métropole* by the closing quote from ‘un antique évangile de Nubie’ at the end of the tale (p. 98).

This quote concerns the decapitation of ‘la tête du Précurseur’ by Salomé and the cutting off of Salomé’s own head instigated by the ‘jeune rhéteur hellène’ (p. 98). This apocryphal text which seems to be Boissière’s own invention not only re-frames his tale within the *fin-de-siècle* metropolitan landscape, but it also puts an emphasis on the ways in which the myth of Salomé is recast with a decadent twist. By assigning the central role to the perverse male protagonist who unexpectedly demands the *femme fatale*’s head, Boissière’s massacre scene points to Delacroix’s much earlier painting, *La Mort de Sardanapale* (1827) (Figure 7). The aloof and lascivious prince dominates whilst gazing indifferently upon the

⁸⁹ Thousands of versions of Salomé were produced in visual arts and literature in Europe from 1870 to 1920. The homoerotic version of this myth will be studied in Chapter Two.

⁹⁰ In *À Rebours*, Des Esseintes describes in detail Moreau’s two paintings, *Salomé dansant devant Hérode* and *L’Apparition* (1876). Des Esseintes’s description ‘became arguably the most famous representation of Salome in the *fin de siècle*’ (Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, p. 111). It is probably through Huysmans’s ekphrases on Moreau’s artworks that writers and artists of the *fin de siècle* came to know and remember them for after being exposed in the Salon of 1876 and later in Exposition Universelle of 1878, they were purchased and became inaccessible to the general public.

⁹¹ Victor Segalen, *Gustave Moreau, maître imagier de l’orphisme* (Paris: Bibliothèque artistique & littéraire, 1984), p. 25 and 33.

scene of massacre he has ordered in the face of his defeat. Beauty and death, sensuality and cruelty are rendered against a luxuriant oriental décor. If Thi-Teu incarnates Moreau's Salomé, Dôc-Liêt is Sardanapalus' double.

According to anecdotes related by a young Guatemalan writer Gomez Carillo and reproduced by the critic of Decadence, Charles Bernheimer, Boissière's apocryphal Nubian gospel was made known to Parisian avant-garde circles by Oscar Wilde. Upon seeing the gory bust of a decapitated woman at Jean Lorrain's dinner party, Wilde identified it with Salomé and recalled this passage from Boissière to the assembled company.⁹² Encouraged to write about the subject on this occasion, Wilde wrote a short story called 'The Double Beheading' before developing it into his play, *Salomé*.⁹³ The play was written in 1891 and performed in Paris in 1896. Whether this anecdote pertaining to the fleeting textual connection between Wilde and Boissière is true or not, Boissière's apocryphal text was certainly quoted by the dandy poet Jean Lorrain in his review of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* alongside a poem from Catulle Mendès.⁹⁴ This intertextuality suggests an acknowledgement of Boissière among the metropolitan literary circle.

Another notable instance of Boissière's influence in the métropole involved an opera-ballet written by Frédéric Le Rey and performed in 1899 at the theatre in Rouen entitled *Thi-Teu, opéra en trois actes et quatre tableaux*.⁹⁵ While the libretto makes no reference to Boissière, it reproduces not only the name of the female character, but also the same plot, with some changes that made the story more dramatic. This libretto is indeed a freeform

⁹² Bernheimer mentions this anecdote in a short footnote in *Decadent Subjects*, p. 212. It is unlikely that Wilde would have read the published version of *Fumeurs d'opium* since it was not published until 1896. However, Boissière was in Paris with his manuscript in 1891 before returning to Indochina in 1892.

⁹³ E. H. Mikhail, *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), pp. 193-4.

⁹⁴ 'Salomé et ses poètes', *Le Journal*, 11 February 1896, p. 1, cited in Diana Haas, *Le Problème religieux dans l'oeuvre de Cavafy: les années de formation 1882-1905* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1996), p. 257. Bernheimer in the same footnote also notes that Cavafy used almost word by word Boissière's gospel to create his poem 'Salomé' in 1896. When reading Cavafy's poem in comparison with Boissière's text, the Greek's 'Salomé' portrays John the Baptist as a new Greek sophist in a reminiscence of Boissière's 'jeune rhéteur hellène' and follows the narrative of Boissière's Nubian text, with the same end portraying Salomé's head and the philosopher's retreat back to the reading of philosophy.

⁹⁵ This opera-libretto is held by the Bodleian Libraries' Special Collections at the University of Oxford.

adaptation of ‘Comédiens ambulants’. Notably, the theatre of Rouen was known to be one of the most important Wagnerian scenes outside of Paris; Wagnerism was fashionable among the French avant-garde at the *fin de siècle*. These trans-generic transpositions from the novelistic text inspired by Indochina to the avant-garde metropolitan theatrical and opera scenes are significant because they attest to a network of adaptations and appropriations of exotic tropes and texts between the centre and the empire and between various art forms.

Picking up on both tropes of the Romantic Oriental despot and the decadent aesthete, the portrait of the Indochinese prince has political implications beyond the aesthetic dimension. Dôc-Liêt symbolises an immutable imperial Vietnam, populated by a degenerate mass whose aloof rulers – depicted as ‘fruits éclatants et bizarres de greffes récentes, serties sur le vieil arbre de la société annamite’ (p. 80) – withdraw into their ancient culture and ‘vice’ (p. 65).

However, the exotic aestheticism deployed throughout the tale is in fact equivocal, since numerous references to current colonial politics suggest an alternative narrative to imperialist discourse. Most importantly, the biography of Dôc-Liêt anchors him into the contemporary context of the pacification, more specifically to that of the nationalist fight against the French seen through the eyes of the Annamites derogatively as the ‘diables d’Occident’ (p. 48, 73) and ‘ces Européens à l’odeur de cadavres’ (p. 65). In fact, the nationalist resistance started in 1885, reached its peak in 1890-91 and abated between 1892 and 1897.⁹⁶ The movement was called *Cần Vương*, from ‘chien can Vương’, which means ‘Save the King’, and aimed to restore Vietnamese independence under Ham Nghi. The term ‘dôc’ in front of the protagonist’s name, Liêt, means ‘chef’ and was the title of the leaders of *Cần Vương*. The latter were mostly Vietnamese military mandarins, but, surprisingly, some

⁹⁶ Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochine: la colonisation ambiguë*, p. 68.

were Chinese.⁹⁷ The novel relates how Liêt is entrusted by the late emperor Tu-Duc, ‘le dernier représentant vraiment national de la dynastie Nguyễn’ with the task of expelling ‘du noble Royaume l’envahisseur’ as ‘affirment les Annamites’ (p. 48). After the flight of the legitimate emperor Ham-Nghi into the mountains, Liêt is said to have been fighting ‘aux côtés du dépossédé et de Thuyêt, le ministre en exil’ before fleeing into the mountain.⁹⁸

This historical embeddedness thus disavows the French colonialist discourse which always denied the existence of the Vietnamese nationalist sentiment by recourse to the dismissive term of ‘piraterie’. The latter is the French translation of the Vietnamese word *giac*, a disdainful term for insurgency in the mandarin tradition. The translation and adoption of the Vietnamese term in this way aimed to amalgamate national resistance with frontier brigandry, indistinguishably called ‘pirates’, and thus to justify the conquest according to Republican ideology. Hence, Jules Ferry could write the following: ‘Ce qui permet de dire que la piraterie n’est en quelque sorte qu’un accident et qu’elle n’aura qu’une durée relativement courte, c’est qu’elle n’est inspirée par aucun sentiment de patriotisme et d’indépendance. L’Annamite n’a presque pas le sentiment national.’⁹⁹ However, in ‘Comédiens ambulants’, the notion of the pirate is doubly ambiguous since the reader later learns that Dôc-Liêt’s soldiers, ‘patriotes convaincus de sa mission libératrice’, nonetheless ‘*pirataient* pour [Dôc-Liêt’s] compte’ (p. 65. My emphasis).

Alongside this alternative colonial history, the hegemonic paradigm of European historicism is equally contested as the ‘nouvelles nées’ European civilisations are disdained

⁹⁷ Brocheux and Hémery, pp. 49-50 and 58-59. One of the famous Chinese chiefs were Liu Yong Fu (Luu Vinh Phuc) of the ‘Pavillons noirs’ who occupied the north of the Red River. He is the main character of Pouvourville’s *L’Annam sanglant* examined in Chapter Two.

⁹⁸ Ham Nghi (1872-1943) was exiled in French Algeria from 1888 where he lived the rest of his life and died in 1944. As for Ton That Thuyêt (1893-1913), the leading mandarin of the late Emperor Tu Duc and the regent of the young emperor Ham Nghi who led the resistance, he was exiled in China since 1887. However, the insurgency continued long after their exile (see William J. Duiker, *Historical Dictionary of Vietnam* (Lanham, MD and London: Scarecrow, 1998), p. 91 and 238), and Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochine: la colonisation ambiguë*, p. 58. Dôc-Liêt even mentions Thuyêt’s exile later in his *monologue intérieur* (p. 64).

⁹⁹ Jules Ferry, *Le Tonkin et la mère patrie*, (Paris: Victor Havard, 1980) p. 275, cited in Daniel Hémery, ‘L’Indochine. De la conquête à la colonisation (1885-1914)’, in *L’Expansion coloniale de la France sous la Troisième République, 1871-1914*, ed. by Jean Ganiage (Paris: Payot, 1968), pp. 354-96.

by the civilised Annamites as barbarian and primitive, rather than energetic and reinvigorating. The graceful gesture of Viet the sage is contrasted with the European gesture ‘attestatrice encore du Singe, l’aïeul où se réfèrent – *dit-on* – ces gesticulants occidentaux, depuis dix-huit siècles à peine émergés des primitives barbaries’ (p. 39. My emphasis). Elsewhere, the non-representational aspect of the Vietnamese theatrical décor is opposed to Western representational theatre: ‘*on* jugerait superflue la reproduction exacte, selon le goût barbare d’Occident, des milieux’ (p. 90. My emphasis). In such passages, a confrontation can be heard, however subtly, between the Annamite and European voices. Whenever a dismissive view on Europe is advanced, it is an Annamite voice that takes charge of the speech through the personal pronoun ‘on’ and the use of free indirect discourse. The technique of narrating from the point of view of the native introduces heteroglossia into the narrative and provokes a reversal of perspective in a critical way insomuch as the Eurocentric view of culture and civilisations is displaced. The validity of the Western model of racial hierarchy and the colonialist doctrine of ‘mission civilisatrice’ are called into question. Racial hierarchy is exposed as a relative concept, not a universal one.

An unresolved tension between the foregrounded aestheticist facture and the background political subtext is maintained throughout ‘Comédiens ambulants’. This narrative strategy is epitomised in the conception of the massacre. The perverse idea being triggered by ‘l’ingénieux opium’, Dôc-Liêt ‘discuta par jeu d’esprit avec son âme’ (p. 89) and, under opiate influence, successively evokes two reasons to support his ultimate order. On the one hand, the reason is political, for he wishes to protect the secret of the location of his refuge and army: ‘Car, alors, que deviendront le mystère de cette retraite, et ce luxe, ces livres, cette chère solitude qu’une parole indiscrete risque de livrer aux brutes d’Occident?’. On the other hand, in line with the decadent attitude, Dôc-Liêt the perverse aesthete wants to preserve his beloved from ‘l’horreur de la vieillesse et des chairs flétries’ (p. 90). This ambivalent nature of decadent opium – as both aestheticist and politically disruptive agent –

will be given its fullest expression in the trope of the *décivilisé* in the last short story as we shall now see.

Critical Ethno-Fiction : ‘Une âme. Journal d’un fusillé’

‘Une âme. Journal d’un fusillé’ encapsulates an unusually overt intermingling between Decadence and colonial politics, suggesting a more personal and cynical view of colonialism as it effects the coloniser, in a narrative far removed from the clichéd regenerative aspect of the colonial conquest. If in the first two stories under discussion, the opium theme gives rise to an ambiguous reading of colonialism by maintaining an unresolvable tension between politics and decadent aesthetics (as illustrated by the equivocal endings), in ‘Une âme’, opium provokes from the outset the protagonist’s dismissive and aloof attitude towards colonial wars, patriotic duty and the civilising mission. This subversion of colonialist ideology triggered by both his decadent attitude and opiate intoxication leads to an epistemological questioning of the white man’s self-identity, while opening up creative potential for a more balanced intercultural contact, despite historically-bounded limitations as we shall see.

‘Une âme’, the last and longest story of the volume, recounts the rapid degeneration of Emmanuel de Césade. Taking the form of a personal journal, the story takes us from his glorious debut in the navy to his decline into a decadent opium addict, followed by his desertion to join the Vietnamese resistance camp along with another low-ranking French soldier, ‘Alfred Plantin, “joyeux” des compagnies africaines’ (p. 172). After fighting for the resistance and gaining the chief’s respect and trust, he is handed over by his Vietnamese comrades to the French soldiers as one of the conditions for surrender (p. 221-2). Sentenced to death ‘1° pour désertion à l’ennemi, avec emport d’effets militaires; 2° pour avoir servi contre la France’ (p. 228), he nonetheless ends his journal with the final words glorifying ‘les bienveillants Génies de L’Opium’ (p. 236).

In the same movement as the protagonist of ‘Dans la forêt’, Césade, a nineteen-year-old child prodigy from an aristocratic military family, leaves decadent France for Indochina with a desire for domination and the hope of regeneration through exotic adventure. Nourished by bookish ideals of adventure, and especially inspired by the works of Jules Verne and Mayne-Reid (p. 166), Césade represents ‘une sorte de type légendaire de l’explorateur, du colonisateur’ transposed into reality by colonial expansion.¹⁰⁰ However, after six months of military service as a *caporal*, the routine life in the barracks bores him so much that he seeks refuge in opium, the act infamously known as ‘tirer sur le bambou’ (p. 167. Emphasis in the text).

Combined with the harmful influence of the Indochinese climate, the hero’s decadent temperament provides a pretext for his initiation to opium: ‘Un mal nerveux, oublié depuis la prime enfance, en une crise avait reparu, par l’influence peut-être du climat torride (...) et je fumai L’Opium avec l’espoir, sinon de tuer le mal, vivace au tréfonds de mon être, au moins de l’endormir et d’en empêcher un nouvel assaut’ (p. 166). Drawing on both the medical discourse of biological pathology (as a descendent of an old aristocratic family) and the politico-aestheticist ‘anti-moderne’ posture,¹⁰¹ Césade’s modern form of Decadence espouses the racialist worldview to express a historically-specific ‘colonialist Decadence’: ‘Et ces joies gamines, après *la métropole odieuse et les haïssables égalités du tramway, de commander à la matraque un peuple de nains*’ (p. 165. My emphasis). However, if Bonnetain’s Marcel sets out

¹⁰⁰ Martine Astier Loutfi, *Littérature et colonialisme: l’expansion coloniale vue dans la littérature romanesque française, 1871-1914* (Paris: Mouton, 1971), pp. 52-53. Thomas Mayne Reid (1818-1883, pseudonym Charles Beach) was an English novelist and children’s writer. His desire for adventure led him to travel and live in America where he became friendly with Edgar Allan Poe. His best-known novels are *The Rifle Rangers* (1850), *The Boys Hunter* (1853), *The Lone Ranch* (1857). He is remembered for his boys’ adventure stories and novels in which adventure is mixed with topography and natural history. The lack of imperialistic discourse, in *The Boys Hunter* for example, and sympathy for oppressed people in his novels are unusual for the period.

¹⁰¹ The anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian sentiment forms one of the underlining traits of the *fin-de-siècle* modern posture. As such, Césade’s Decadence is at once a reaction against and a symptom of modernity, in line with avant-garde artists and thinkers of the time. On this point, see Antoine Compagnon, *Les Antimodernes: de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard ‘Bibliothèque des idées’, 2005). For a discussion of the relationship between the anti-democratic movement and decadent ideology in the political sphere during the *fin-de-siècle*, see *L’Éternel retour. Contre la démocratie: l’idéologie de la décadence*, ed. by Zeev Sternhell (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1994).

the *fin-de-siècle* archetype of the decadent coloniser, Boissière's Césade provides its fullest articulation as the decadent coloniser turned 'décivilisé' with significant political and existential implications.

Césade's opium addiction not only provokes his physical degeneration, but ultimately leads him to transgress the normative boundaries of his own racial and cultural identity in several ways. After he is given a final warning by his superior, he compares his unrewarding military engagement to promises offered by opium (p. 171). After his desertion, Césade utterly repudiates the idea of patriotic duty. Faced with Dôc-Cô, the leader of the Vietnamese resistance, for the first time, while Plantin is pleading for their lives and pledging their loyalty to the cause of the resistance, Césade reflects: 'la fidélité au Drapeau, symbole de la patrie imposée, apparut toujours à mon intelligence raisonneuse comme un sentiment stupide, et que, même admise l'idée du Devoir, le Devoir est dans le dévouement au chef librement élu' (p. 182). He disavows the ideological foundation of modern European societies, such as nation, family, education honour and patriotic duty. This is the sheer idea of moral progress that partly underpins the imperialist ideology of the *mission civilisatrice*, with its ontological division between the 'civilised' coloniser and the primitive/decadent colonised.¹⁰²

However, ultimately, it is his need for opium that dictates his submission to the resistance. Dôc-Cô decides to keep him and Plantin 'en qualité de domestiques', as 'boys': '- "Vous faire *boys*", traduisit l'interprète, "vous contents?" – Oui, parbleu! Plantin ne voulait pas mourir, et moi je voulais fumer. [...] Toujours muet, je souffrais, – mais du manque d'opium plus encore que d'appréhension et de regrets' (p. 183).

¹⁰² In both the political discourse of the time and historical studies on the ideology of colonialism in France, the term *mission civilisatrice* was used more often than the term *le fardeau de l'homme blanc*, generally used by their Anglo-saxon peers. However, in the French usage, these expressions are almost interchangeable and refer to a similar imperialist ideology. *Le fardeau de l'homme blanc* is a translation of the title of Ruyard Kipling's famous poem *The White Man's Burden* (1899). For the origin and development of the idea of a civilising mission in France, see Dino Costantini, *Mission civilisatrice. Le rôle de l'histoire coloniale dans la construction de l'identité politique française* (Paris: La Découverte, [2006] 2008), Blanchard and Lemaire, *Culture coloniale: la France conquise par son Empire, 1871-1931*, and Alain Ruscio, *Le Credo de l'homme blanc: regards coloniaux français, XIXe-XXe siècles* (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 1995).

Opium addiction gradually reduces him in social standing from *caporal* to traitor and, at the end, *boy*. The colonial nomenclature colonisers use to call their *yellow* servants is recuperated here to ironically designate the *white* servants. The colonial relation defined by racialised boundaries, in which the coloniser is always white and the colonised is always of other races, is radically subverted here, with a reversal of ‘privilège’, the notion considered by Albert Memmi to lie at the heart of the oppressive nature of unbalanced colonial relations.¹⁰³ The end of the idea of novelistic adventure heralds this change of status: ‘Mes hauts rêves d’aventure voilà leur fin, et le réveil’ (p. 183). Boissière portrays here the emergence of a new historical subject, that is, the radical experience of identity ‘dislocation’ of a coloniser behind enemy lines.¹⁰⁴

This boundary crossing leads him to a comparative reflection on the ways in which imperialist occupation of territories similarly affects both coloniser and colonised alike, albeit in different and unequal ways:

Je préfère Bismarck, Goethe et Confucius à l’entière municipalité de Paris, cœur et cerveau de France. [...] C’est juré; je me livre âme et corps à la Cause des rebelles, des patriotes. Après tout, je vaudrai bien, parmi ceux qui s’arment pour l’indépendance contre de haïssables exotiques, ces Annamites que nous décorions, ces mandarins qui bâtonnent et décapitent, au nom de la France, leurs frères insurgés. (p. 187)

The ‘pirates’ (p. 175) from the beginning are recognised here as ‘patriotes’ fighting for independence, whereas Césaire’s former compatriots become ‘de haïssables exotiques’. The narrative technique of ‘the native point of view’ experimented with earlier in the figure of Dôc-Liêt in ‘Comédiens ambulants’ finds its most critical articulation here in the

¹⁰³ Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Payot, [1957] 1973), p. 14.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Dislocation’ is a postcolonial concept usually used to depict the experiences of physical displacement as a result of imperialism. It is often accompanied by the epistemological experience of disintegration and fragmentation inherent to postcolonial subjectivity. It draws on Heidegger’s term of *umheimlich* or *umheimlichkeit*, translated as ‘unhousedness’ or ‘not-at-home-ness’ or the ‘uncanny’, the ‘uncannyness’. In Bhabha’s theorization of the postcolonial subject, the trope of dislocation/decentering is used to take into account the ‘interstitial passages and processes of cultural difference that are inscribed in the “in-between”, in the temporal break-up that weaves the “global” text’ (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 310). As such, it also can mean a spatio-temporal displacement of Western colonial discourse caught between the metropolitan point of enunciation and the colonial site of address.

wholehearted adoption of anti-colonialist language and attitudes by the Western protagonist. Judging from the locus of the colonised, he establishes a parallel between ‘traitors’ from the two camps, prompting reflexion in the mind of the reader on the well-known ‘*tirailleurs tonkinois*’.

By adopting this strategy of amalgamation, Césade threatens the hegemonic ‘code of regulations’ of being a white man.¹⁰⁵ This ‘concrete manner of being-in-the-world’, as Edward Said puts it, requires a two-fold scheme of inclusion and exclusion, a division between us and them. By erasing this frontier, Césade can affirm a sense of fraternity with other soldiers in a session of opium smoking. In a way reminiscent of the fraternity depicted in ‘L’Ennui’ and the intoxication evoked in Baudelaire’s ‘Au Lecteur’,¹⁰⁶ he notes: ‘On fuma *fraternellement* sur le même lit de camp, tout en causant avec quelques amis (...) *entre camarades*, dans une atmosphère de sympathie cordiale et d’opium’ (p. 190. My emphasis). At the same time, Césade asserts the radical desire to ‘déciviliser’ or ‘go native’,¹⁰⁷ though his recurrent dreams of adventures and domination betrays his former identity:

Si jamais les Français nous chassent ici, alors je suivrai Dôc-Cô en terre chinoise, et nous vieillirons en sages lettrés dans un village de Quang-Si. J’achèterai des femmes obéissantes, pour procréer de beaux males; mes enfants ne sauront pas que leur père fut un vilain “diable d’Occident”; nous leur inspirerons, avec le respect des traditions et des livres, la haine des barbares étrangers. (p. 192)

The physical and identity dislocation triggered by opium opens up a ‘contact zone’, in which not only the possibility of exchange with the native emerges, but also where the critical questionings of cultural difference can be articulated. This is best developed in the interaction between Césade and Dôc-Cô.

¹⁰⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 227.

¹⁰⁶ ‘– Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère’ (Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 5).

¹⁰⁷ The widespread fear of contamination by native cultures, viewed as a menace for the white coloniser-adventurer, is ubiquitous in *fin-de-siècle* literature with the character of Kurt in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as its most renowned representative. Critical reflection on the concept of ‘going native’ is undertaken predominantly in the field of anthropology, partly as the concept of the ‘primitive mentality’ played such a central role in the development of the discipline. See in particular Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

As laid out by Boissière in *A propos d'un intoxiqué*, opium facilitates a penetration into the native culture and mind: ‘les soirs, je fumais chez Côté; et j’arrivais, croyais-je, à comprendre cet homme autant que je l’aimais’ (p. 195). This epistemological opening up towards the colonised other is rendered here in the language of affection and love, prefiguring August Pavie’s propagandist monograph *À la conquête des cœurs* (1921), although in a reversed movement, for here it is the colonised who wins the coloniser’s heart. Admitting Césaire into his *fumerie* and presenting him to his generals (p. 186-7), Dôt-Côté who represents at once an aloof Decadent and a nationalist leader, inspires in Césaire a sentiment of respect which soon turns into devotion and affection towards a patriarchal figure (p. 202). The young traitor informs them of the French army’s weaponry and armed forces (p. 187-8) and is then assigned a new role as commander of a group of men (p. 192).

Beginning as an object of study – his conversations during opium smoking are said to be ‘intéressantes pour un curieux de psychologies inédites’ (p. 197) –, Dôt-Côté reverses the power relations and comes to be the one who studies Césaire: ‘Il jouait de mon âme en maître psychologue’ (p. 198). Hence, the ‘schéma classique’, of a White demiurge who reigns as a master and a civiliser over the indigenous, is undermined here.¹⁰⁸ Dôt-Côté is also presented as a modern-day leader, foreshadowing the anti-colonial resistance and guerrilla wars organised by Ho Chi Minh in the twentieth century during the French Indochina war. Accounts of the administration of his army as well as a larger picture of the Vietnamese resistance are abundantly noted by Césaire, showing a modern military organisation (p. 181 and 188).

Affinities with Dôt-Côté and his mandarin generals provides him with an ethno-anthropological explanation for the differences between the Indochinese paradigm of

¹⁰⁸ Alain Ruscio, *Le Credo de l’homme blanc*, pp. 79-106.

civilisation and the Western one in such a way that ‘Une âme’ can ultimately be seen as a transcultural ‘ethno-fiction’:

À écouter les mandarins en leurs causeries de dilettanti, je m’explique pourquoi l’Annamite persiste à nous dire inférieurs aux Célestes. Ce n’est pas simple préjugé d’ignorants: la Chine est la patrie intellectuelle, et jamais, malgré télégraphe et téléphone, l’Annamite n’admettra notre supériorité; il pense exactement comme un sorbonicole à qui l’on veut démontrer la civilisation nord-américaine supérieure à la Rome des Augustes ou à l’Athènes de Périclès. (p. 199)

Despite the judgemental tone reflected by the use of the pejorative noun ‘sorbonicole’, Césade’s account of the Indochinese mind suggests an affinity with the anti-evolutionist, cultural relativism of some of the *fin-de-siècle* anthropologists like Franz Boas. This avant-garde anthropological view contradicted widespread concepts of the ‘primitive’, arguing for the ‘diversity and complexity of primitive social and mental formations’ and claiming that primitive modes of thinking and cultures were not “simpler”, just different from Western thinking and cultures’.¹⁰⁹ Césade can thus make his insightful comments on the thinking of the Vietnamese only after accepting their differences, without subordinating them to racist ideas of white supremacy.

Césade’s radical awareness of cultural difference leads him not only to criticise the absurdity of the war in which no one wins (p. 24), but also the idea of patriotism in all its expressions (p. 204), whether it be French, imperialist or Indochinese. His criticism touches on the contemporary question of rising nationalism in Europe, with patriotism as its corollary. By the same token, his story also points out, albeit critically, a nascent nationalist sentiment among the ‘indigenous’ in Indochina, whose awareness of the idea of the modern nation-state seems to come mainly from a reaction against colonial threats.

If, in ‘Comédiens ambulants’, the displacement of the European paradigm of historicism exposes the relativist aspect of the Western racial hierarchy, Césade’s *décivilisation* goes further in acknowledging the limits of such transcultural contact. His anthropological

¹⁰⁹ Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, p. 19.

scrutiny falls short, faced with the linguistic barrier. At several instances, he admits the problem of incommunicability. He is ‘muet’ (p. 183) or he ‘souffrai[t] de traduire mal par [s]on incorrect annamite. Empêtré parmi les mots et la syntaxe’ (p. 185). He needs to use the translator during his first encounter with Côté (p. 183) and also when he trains his soldiers (p. 192). Côté’s conversations tire him ‘par l’effort intellectuel où [lui] astreint l’usage d’un idiome imparfaitement connu’ (p. 197). Silence, which the indigenous characters are usually reduced to in colonial literature, is paradoxically experienced here by the colonising subject, not as a result of coercive deprivation, but rather as the limits of his historical and cultural situation. This epistemological resistance which seems to contradict the ‘going native’ topos can, nevertheless, be partly understood as a positive feature inherent in a true communication with the radical difference.

Segalen posits in his unfinished notes towards an *Essai sur l’exotisme* that awareness of difference underlies the true epistemological experience of the radical ‘Other’ (the first meaning of ‘exoticism’) which he calls ‘le Divers’: ‘l’Exotisme n’est donc pas une adaptation; n’est donc *pas la compréhension parfaite* d’un hors soi-même qu’on étreindrait en soi, mais *la perception aiguë et immédiate d’une incompréhensibilité éternelle*. (...) la permutabilité du plaisir de sentir le Divers’.¹¹⁰ Césaire’s experience of this ‘incompréhensibilité’ partakes in an ethical attitude towards the Other. The power to ‘concevoir autre’ is ambivalent as it informs and is informed by its own limit. This limit is a productive, if not desirable, condition, a guarantee against all forms of over-exoticising. In this experience, the Other resists the status of the object of knowledge, which is its usual situation in traditional epistemology. Rather, the sheer material and contextual existence comes to the fore as a marker of cultural difference.

In Boissière’s writing, decadent opium plays a crucial role in this epistemological experience of the Other. The quasi-religious ritual of opium smoking introduces an

¹¹⁰ Segalen, *Essai sur l’exotisme*, p. 23 and 25. My emphasis.

alternation between conversation and silence, opening up the contact zone while maintaining a certain impermeability through the intermittent silence practised by all participants (p. 185). This epistemological movement and its limits can best be approached in terms of a dialectical movement with opium as the creative and ethical medium of the crossing, collapsing and (re-)marking of borders.

However, if Dôc-Cô represents the ultimate Other whose portrait defies traditional views of the colonised, the same cannot be said for the other Indochinese. Césade portrays the ‘yellow’ race collectively according to racist and primitivist discourse, although claiming that his first-hand experience is different from the French stereotypical view (p. 217). These contradictions in Césade’s ethical and moral stances – between a more informed anthropological gaze and primitivist discourse, between the experience of ‘le Divers’ and clichéd exoticism – can be read as symptomatic of the dislocated colonialising subject, at a time when colonialism came to be the dominant narrative. The dislocated colonialising subject seems to be condemned to perpetual alienation: ‘*toujours l’étranger, parmi les vivants et parmi les morts*’ (p. 202)’

At the end of the story, held in captivity by the French, he refuses to adopt the moralistic and nationalist discourses his lawyer asks him to take up during his trial. He wants to stay ‘libre’ (p. 229). Césade’s story anticipates one of those delicate ‘situations historiques impossibles’ that Memmi defines in his ‘Portrait du colonisateur’ when he writes about the figure of the ‘colonisateur de gauche’ who has sympathy for the cause of the colonised. As his life in the colony is contradictory to his ideology, he needs to abandon his role as a coloniser and become a ‘transfuge’, a situation that is suspicious in the eyes of both the colonisers and the colonised.¹¹¹ Although Memmi’s figure of the ‘transfuge’ pertains to the question of political ideology, the ‘contradiction grave’ between his metropolitan identity as

¹¹¹ Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, pp. 65-69.

one of the colonisers and his desire to be accepted by the colonised can elucidate Césade's ontological crisis. As a 'transfuge' who arrives long before the age of decolonisation, Césade threatens the figure of the virile colonial man along with the imperial project itself. His historical conundrum cannot be allowed a positive ending and thus he is executed by the French authority.

Like the first two stories, the narrative mode in which the story of 'Une âme' is related plays out a sense of ambiguity pertaining to the stance the story takes *vis-à-vis* the relationship between colonialism and Decadence. Written in the form of a personal journal, its retrospective auto-criticism undermines all the convictions advanced by Césade's past selves, giving rise to a constant conflict between the anti-colonialist discourse of the traitor and the ironised and distanced stance of the convict.

* * * * *

Boissière's key texts articulate the colonial experiences of the early French occupation of Indochina viewed from both sides. More than the panacea for the *mal du pays*, as colonial writers often suggest, decadent opium acts as a destabilising principle that leads to political consciousness and epistemological questioning. Opiate addiction opens up a space for (self-)criticism and a possibility for intercultural exchange, albeit with a certain ambiguity. These two possibilities already suggested in our discussion of 'Dans la forêt' and 'Comédiens ambulants' are problematised in 'Une âme' in such a way that Decadence is revealed in its full political potential for what might be called 'critical Decadence'. The ambivalence sustained in these short stories can be seen as inherent to the initial stage of the discursive construction of Indochina's literary imagery, while reflecting the hesitations and doubts regarding the French political presence in the region at the turn of the century.

**TOWARDS MODERNITÉ LITTÉRAIRE :
CLAUDE FARRÈRE'S *FUMÉE D'OPIMUM***

Des contes chaudement colorés apparaissant derrière
un brouillard laiteux. [...] Cela nous laisse un goût d'amertume,
et si c'est bien écrit, ça nous fatigue un peu
comme si on fumait soi-même, en lisant, une pipe vide.¹¹²

Almost two decades separate the first fictionalisation of opiate Indochina – Paul Bonnetain's *L'Opium* (1886) – from Claude Farrère's *Fumée d'opium* (1904), and a decade between the latter and Jules Boissière's *Fumeurs d'opium* (1896). By the time Farrère's collection of short stories was published, after the turn of the century,¹¹³ the opium theme had become a hackneyed *topos*, particularly in French literature, as attested by Pierre Louÿs in his preface to *Fumée d'opium*. Louÿs contrasts the 'maladif' and 'fantastique' opium to the predilection for 'clarté', 'simplicité' and 'de couleurs claires' in contemporary literature and visual arts (p. 8).

However, the renowned poet immediately expresses his admiration for this young, and at the time unknown, writer, for his 'talent complet' and concludes that 'M. Farrère apporte d'inédit (*sic*) à la littérature de l'opium' (p. 9). Pierre Louÿs' remark comes from an exclusively metropolitan standpoint. For if one looks at the development of the opiate imagination specifically in relation to Indochina in French colonial literature, it becomes clear that Farrère's fiction draws on a set of discourses and styles already present in *fin-de-siècle* traditions in the wake of Naturalism and following Bonnetain and Boissière.

Fumée d'opium nevertheless renews Indochinese opiate literature by orienting it towards a 'modernité littéraire', a reading that Alain Quella-Villéger suggests can be extrapolated from Louÿs' preface.¹¹⁴ While the meaning of this literary modernity and the ways it played out remain unexplored, I would argue that the short stories in *Fumée d'opium*

¹¹² Rachilde's review of *Fumée d'opium* in *Le Mercure de France* (1904), 730.

¹¹³ Claude Farrère, *Fumée d'opium* (Paris: Kailash, [1904] 2004), with Pierre Louÿs' preface, pp. 7-10. The Bibliothèque nationale de France owns the 1904 edition published by Société d'Éditions Littéraires et Artistiques. The novel was subsequently republished by Paul Ollendorff and Flammarion.

¹¹⁴ Alain Quella-Villéger, a specialist of Pierre Loti and Farrère, writes: 'Pierre Louÿs, comme les autres critiques, titre (*sic*) fort justement les nouvelles vers la modernité littéraire' ('Postface' to *Fumée d'opium*, p. 240).

are modern in that, more than any other colonial narrative featuring opium, Farrère's opiate Indochina is embedded within a global exchange between the metropolis and the colony and between the French empire and the world. As a result of this colonial and global contact, an exploration of modern subjectivity from both sides – coloniser and colonised – lies at the heart of many of the seventeen short stories. While this problematic had been adumbrated in both Bonnetain's and Boissière's stories, Farrère takes it further, particularly in his articulation of a 'subterranean' energy generated by opiate intoxication. This is ready to resurface, both materially and metaphorically, in the forms of resistance and oppositionality within and beyond the boundaries of the empire, at the time when the discursive construction of literary Indochina can be said to have been 'tamed' following 'la première phase de l'exploitation' by Paul Doumer from 1897 to 1902.¹¹⁵ It was also at this time that social and legal condemnation of opium started to emerge.

Two short stories, 'Les bêtes' and 'Hors de silence' will be the focus of my analysis. The former explores identity politics through the strategy of colonial camouflage performed by the 'assimilated' colonised, while the latter plays out the trope of contamination through a reversed trajectory back home in the metropolis, belying claims about the anti-decadent energy available owing to the colonial enterprise.

* * * * *

Following in his father's footsteps, Frédéric-Charles-Pierre Bargone (1876-1957) entered the École navale in 1894 to become a navy officer. He travelled to French Indochina between December 1897 and July 1899. He resigned from the Navy in 1919 in order to pursue a career in literature. He was elected to the *Académie française*, beating Paul Claudel by five votes in 1935. During his long career, Charles Bargone produced a large corpus, ranging from novels (including detective fiction) to travel writing and journalism. He was a friend of Pierre

¹¹⁵ Fourniau, *Vietnam. Domination coloniale et résistance nationale*, p. 511.

Louÿs and Victor Segalen among others,¹¹⁶ and an admirer of Pierre Loti whom he met in Istanbul, Turkey, in 1903. Pierre Loti was at the time commander of the ship *Vautour* and became Bargone's superior for two years.

Fumée d'opium was initially the name of a short story signed by a certain Pierre Toulven,¹¹⁷ which won the fourth prize in a short story competition launched by the newspaper *Journal* in 1902. Later baptised 'Le Cyclone', the story was published in 1904 along with sixteen other stories under what had been its original title. For the publication of the collection, Bargone adopted the pseudonym Claude Farrère to avoid trouble from the military authorities.¹¹⁸ This pseudonym became his literary identity throughout his career. Unlike Bonnetain and Boissière, Farrère quickly became part of Parisian literary circles, thanks mostly to his friendship with Pierre Louÿs. *Fumée d'opium* was also a commercial success as half of the 1500 copies were sold after one year.

The seventeen stories are divided into six 'époques' – 'Les Légendes', 'Les Annales', 'Les Extases', 'Les Troubles', 'Les Fantômes', 'Le Cauchemar' – which trace the development of opiate addiction from the mythical visions of the first stories to the imminent death in the last. They were written during and after Claude Farrère's military missions in French Indochina, Japan, China and later in Turkey. Hence, the narratives take place in various locations, sweeping from France and Europe to the Orient (Turkey) and the Far East (Indochina and China). Otherwise, the stories take place in an opium den situated in an unspecified space. Despite this sweeping panorama of locations, it is not opium in a general

¹¹⁶ Claude Farrère and Victor Segalen met in 1905. It seems that Segalen expressed his admiration for *Fumée d'opium* and *Les Civilisés*. He also gave Farrère drafts of his novel *Les Immémoriaux*, which Farrère read attentively, giving suggestions and advice. See Alain Quella-Villéger, *Le Cas Farrère: du Goncourt à la disgrâce* (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 1989), p. 51, and 'Farrère, Segalen et l'opium', *Carnets de l'exotisme. Retour à Segalen*, 21 (1998), 51-58.

¹¹⁷ Pierre Toulven was his first pseudonym for his journalistic articles on the Navy's politics and colonial and international affairs, published in Lyon's newspaper *Salut Public* from 1897 to 1903.

¹¹⁸ For the study of the conflicts between Loti's and Farrère's literary activities and the military authorities, see Alain Quella-Villéger, 'Deux Marins-écrivains face à la Marine française: Pierre Loti et Claude Farrère (1869-1919)', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* (1993), 153-60.

sense, but specifically ‘Extrême-Oriental’ opium, with its trans-temporal and trans-spatial ramifications, that generates the dynamics of the entire volume.¹¹⁹

Perverse Subterranean Resistance in ‘Les bêtes’

‘Les bêtes’ is one of the only two tales in *Fumée d’opium* that take place in Indochina. The other story is ‘Fai-Tsi-Loung’, a rewriting of the legendary origin of Halong Bay, one of the most renowned exotic sites in Indochina.¹²⁰ At the outset, this tale of an Annamite princess appears to be a counterpoint to the legend of Halong Bay. While the story of the pirate-smoker takes place in Tonkin in a mythico-historical time, the setting of ‘Les bêtes’ is the contemporary Indochina, with its urban life and social scenes. Although the town is simply called ‘la Ville’ with a capital letter, described as ‘une capitale de l’Extrême-Orient’ (p.108), it is unmistakably Saigon. As the centre of French domination in the region, Saigon had been modernised in imitation of metropolitan cities since its occupation by the French in the 1860s. By the time of Farrère’s visit in 1899, Saigon was already known as the ‘Paris de l’Extrême-Orient’.¹²¹

The tale is divided into two parts that correspond to the diurnal and nocturnal Saigon. It depicts the life of the daughter of a Tong-Doc.¹²² Her father, the ‘vieux prince traître et servile’, is under French control and declares himself to be ‘Européen, démocrate, catholique’ (p. 107). His people ‘s’y courbe sous le joug barbare des faces blanches venues de l’ouest.’ As for his daughter, ‘qui jadis eût été princesse’, she is named by him ‘Anna’, ‘comme une fille d’Europe’ (p. 108). Educated in a ‘couvent’, she ‘performs’ with perfection European

¹¹⁹ For example, in ‘Les deux âmes de Rodolphe Hafner’, the story takes place first in New Orleans and later in France. The main character, the decadent Rodolphe, has an opium den in his house in New Orleans. He is described as having a Far Eastern soul although he is in the New World (p. 167).

¹²⁰ This *merveilleux* tale centres around an encounter between a decadent pirate and the female divinity, daughter of the Dragon king, who transforms her blood into opium to save him. Intermingling legends with historical facts, this tale is also inspired by Farrère’s personal experiences when he was stationed in Halong Bay from December 1897 to July 1899. See Claude Farrère, *Mes voyages. La Promenade d’Extrême-Orient* (Paris: Kailash, [1923] 1999), pp. 51-3.

¹²¹ Charles Meyer, *La Vie quotidienne des Français en Indochine 1860-1910* (Paris: Hachette, 1985), p. 68.

¹²² Tông Dôc is a mandarin appointed by the Emperor as the chief of a province, often translated in French as ‘gouverneur’ (Fourniau, *Vietnam. Domination coloniale et résistance nationale*, p. 808).

manners and customs: she flirts, plays tennis, goes to theatre, drinks English tea while holding tea from Yunnan in contempt (p. 108) and differentiates herself from the people she calls 'les indigènes' (p. 109).

The first part of the story ends with social activities at nightfall: the promenade and the theatre. The 'promenade à la mode', where all of Saigonese society can see and be seen in victorias, is depicted as 'une vision d'Europe, une vision luxueuse d'Armenonville ou d'Hyde-Park' (p. 110).¹²³ This promenade refers to the famous 'promenade de l'Inspection', the Champs-Élysées of Saigon. Later in *Les Civilisés*, this bourgeois promenade is transformed into a place of debauchery, particularly at nightfall.

Anna's body, expressions and costume (p. 111-2) are described in detail, in line with the decadent obsession with artificiality, aestheticism and exoticism. Displaying similar traits as Boissière's opera performer, Thi-Teu, in 'Comédiens ambulants', Anna incarnates the *fin-de-siècle* Indochinese *femme fatale* which by 1904 had become one of the stereotypes of the Indochinese woman, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. This portrait of exotic femininity reminiscent of Gustave Moreau's Salomé is completed by the Tainean credo of 'race, milieu, moment' and the mask motif, in the tradition of Baudelaire's 'éloge du maquillage': 'Mais sur le masque atavique, l'éducation nouvelle a posé son masque nouveau; et le sourire, le regard, et le geste s'accordent pour transformer la Princesse-Très-Lointaine en une Parisienne toute moderne, mal déguisée sous sa robe d'Orient' (p. 112). Anna thus seems to embody the ideal figure of the 'modern Indochinese colonial subject', in line with the discourse of 'assimilation'.

However, as suggested in the quote, ambiguity and anxiety pervade her characterisation. The use of irony betrays the presence of the French narrator, who notes in passing that she 'diffère très peu de n'importe quelle "mademoiselle Anna" de Paris ou de

¹²³ Armenonville is the name of the road near the Bois de Boulogne. Both of these references refer to urban parklands with upper-class promenades.

Londres’, if it is not for her ‘costume oriental’, her sandals ‘qui révèlent l’irréprochable pied asiatique’ and her ‘beauté indifférente, moins blafarde, — plus fine, plus racée, — mystérieuse’ (p. 108-9), before dismissing this remark and insisting on her Europeanisation: ‘N’importe; la fille du Tong-Doc a véritablement oublié sa race et son destin aboli’ (p. 109). Indeed, the topos of ‘déguisement’ (and mask) is played out with the concept of ‘atavism’ as its corollary, that something is hidden behind the artificial surface. The Naturalist concept of atavism, which Decadence takes up and perversely pathologises in biological and physical signs of degeneration, is combined here with the notion of race. Anna’s racial difference is emphasised through her ancient ancestry throughout the text and later articulated through the expression, ‘l’âme d’Extrême-Orient’ (p. 121).¹²⁴ This word shift will reveal its significance as the story progresses into the second part. An anxiety and suspicion also derive from the Far Eastern exoticist elements feeding into Anna’s frigidity. The depiction of her ironic smile and disdainful attitude is compared to that of the ‘idoles impériales oubliées’ (p. 111) in the pagodas, alluding to the ironic smile of the statue of Buddha omnipresent in colonial literature of Indochina.¹²⁵ Anna’s menacing image as a fetishized idol is all-pervasive, reaching its fullest expression in relation to the enigmatic title of the tale as we shall see.

At nightfall, nocturnal Saigon reveals another facet of the Indochinese life: ‘les bouges d’opium, [...] bouges de prostitution’ (p. 112), where debauchery and immorality are paraded through ‘les couples en humeur lubrique’ (p. 113). In an opium den at the farthest periphery of the city, ‘une femme, jeune et belle, très élégante’ enters among male and female prostitutes. It is in fact Anna in disguise and she is there for opium. Suddenly, a group of

¹²⁴ Pierre Citti shows that the concept of ‘énergie’ emerges at the end of the century in reaction, ‘Contre la Décadence’, in particular in the form of ‘énergie nationale’ (*Contre la décadence*, pp. 113-50). The notion of ‘race’ constitutes the heart of this regeneration of energy: ‘le terme “race” s’était imposé pour désigner la source, la ressource et comme “l’énergie” des nations. Toujours il apporte sa nuance de rappel des origines, des liens de consanguinité, d’une hérédité des caractères collectifs. Il ajoute au patriotisme une justification physiologique et la dimension de l’inconscient’ (p. 170). Considered as a regenerative force, the energy trope manifests itself in both regionalist and colonial literature. The two became the battleground for a regenerative discourse against Decadence. Farrère’s transition from the notion of race in the first part to Anna’s hidden Far Eastern ‘âme’ in the second part is crucial, as her decadent soul resists the regenerative process of French colonialism.

¹²⁵ The trope of the Buddha’s ironic smile will be discussed in Chapter Three.

French officers and civil servants looking for ‘une débauche’ (114) enters the premise. In contrast to the respectful manner adopted by the indigenous prostitutes earlier towards Anna, the French colonials are depicted as barbarian, primitive and uncivilised: ‘le résumé parfait de l’Occident envahisseur, l’essence même de l’Europe, acharnée à meurtrir, sous sa barbarie affairée, et grossière, la sagesse indolente et subtile de l’Orient vaincu’ (p. 114). They try to molest her, ask her for her name and demand to sleep with her. The brothel madam tells them that her name is Thi-Nam, ‘un nom très vulgaire’ (p. 116) and that she is ‘inviolable’, having ‘la plus admirable syphilis de tout le pays’ (p. 117). The French men are disgusted and insult her: ‘– tout ça tout pourri! [...] Ça lui est rudement égal, cette révélation publique! Une blanche en mourrait de honte; mais les femmes d’ici, c’est comme des chiennes, pauvre race!’

The fear of syphilis was omnipresent in *fin-de-siècle* metropolitan literature, specifically embodied in the figure of the *femme fatale* as Pierre Citti notes on the subject of *Salomé* and *Des Esseintes*: ‘Symbole vénérien, dont l’envoûtement fascine Hérode comme la terreur de la Grande Vérole paralysait des Esseintes dans son cauchemar.’¹²⁶ In Indochina, syphilis provoked substantial cultural anxiety among the French authorities, who were concerned not so much about the health of the colonised as for the health and morality of the colonials. In his remarkable study of the French colonial imagination in relation to Indochinese social vices, Frank Proschan shows how syphilis, opiomania and pederasty were constructed as interconnected through colonial-era discourses. He uncovers a number of arguments and rhetoric deployed to support or to respond to discourses of the degeneracy of the colonised between Annamitophiles and Annamitophobes.¹²⁷ Farrère seems to reproduce here the

¹²⁶ Citti, *Contre la décadence*, p. 39.

¹²⁷ The two views can be summarised as follows: either the French colonials are ‘innocent victims who were corrupted by the hot tropical climate, isolation, temptation, and the sexual practices of the Vietnamese’, or the Vietnamese were merely students of the vices to the colonising French (“‘Syphilis, Opiomania, and Pederasty’: Colonial Constructions of Vietnamese (And French) Social Diseases’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 11 (2002), 610-36 (p. 620)).

common view of the French authorities on opium dens as the ‘loci of lubricity and sexual immorality, with the resultant syphilitic infection.’¹²⁸

However, by drawing on the ‘actual’ fear of this venereal disease, this ‘lie’ concocted by her host, liberates Anna from the colonisers’ desire for her body, from ‘la brutalité des oppresseurs’ (p. 118). This strategy of using colonial discourse against itself, especially coming from an aged prostitute (in contrast with the virile French colonials), is particularly striking and points towards the form of resistance, however limited, that the colonial subject could perform during the period of the colonial rule. This strategic displacement and subversion based on the use of the coloniser’s discourse echoes what Homi Bhabha calls ‘the metonymic strategy’ in his theory of colonial mimicry:

The metonymic strategy produces the signifier of colonial *mimicry* as the affect of hybridity – at once a mode of appropriation and resistance, from the disciplined to the desiring. As the discriminated object, the metonym of presence becomes the support of an authoritarian voyeurism, all the better to exhibit the eye of power. Then, as discrimination turns into the assertion of the hybrid, the insignia of authority becomes a mask, a mockery.¹²⁹

In an echo of her colonial ‘mask’ suggested in the first part, Anna’s desirable, yet supposedly syphilitic, body in the second part readily takes on a ‘mockery’ of colonial discourse, transforming into a site of resistance, in consequence of opiate intoxication.

Lying in silence smoking, Anna is once again called ‘La Princesse Sainte, la Suzeraine de la Ville, la Réservee – par droit de race’ (p. 118). The text’s constant insistence on her antique race reflects the most common belief produced by colonial discourse, according to which opiomania is a trait of Indochinese racial heredity,¹³⁰ if not an inherent pathology, not least the symptom and cause of their racial degeneracy. Building on this colonial discourse, Farrère’s tale nonetheless ends by displacing it in favour of the colonised through opiate

¹²⁸ Proschan, “‘Syphilis, Opiomania, and Pederasty’”, 610-36 (p. 623).

¹²⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 172.

¹³⁰ ‘More often, however, opiomania was taken as a Vietnamese ethnic if not racial predilection’ (Proschan, 610-36 (p. 623)).

hallucination in which Anna's opiate body becomes the perverse, yet subversive, site of bestial adoration.

Under the influence of 'la fumée noire', the text is instantly transformed into a *fantastique* tale (p. 119-122), intertwining decadent erotic perversity associated with the 'masse noire' with Boissière's adventurer's haunting visions of bestial and spectral menace. Repulsive insects and beasts come out of their hidden dens towards the lamp where 'la fumeuse' lies. They surround the 'reine découronnée' without touching her body and create a halo of 'fourmillement'. A long paragraph details 'des myriades d'insectes' and, according to their geographical habitation and movement, from top to bottom, from the wall to the centre of the antique 'cañha'¹³¹: 'grandes araignées velues', 'cancrelats bruns', 'fourmis', 'blattes', 'scorpions', 'perce-oreilles', 'petits lézards', 'moustiques', 'maringouins'. In this bestial brouhaha, the insects perversely kill each other during mating: 'Tous courent affairés sous les nattes, se cherchent et s'évitent; se heurtent et se battent, *s'aiment et se dévorent*, au hasard des races et des sexes' (My emphasis). But quickly, opiate intoxication pacifies this agitation and inspires intelligence in the beast, shifting this bestial ritual of sacrifice, copulation, cannibalism towards a perverse act of religious adoration. They proceed to a procession in 'longues lignes concentriques' towards the 'Vierge veuve des Empereurs' and circle her body 'comme d'une auréole immobile'.

Anna's body can thus shed its European polish and reclaim its Indochinese quasi-magical power:

En un clin d'œil a craqué le vernis occidental. Il n'y plus ici de tyrans à flatter. *L'âme d'Extrême-Orient* peut s'ériger souveraine au-dessus des *mômeries barbares de la race conquérante*. Et le sourire énigmatique qui entrouvre les minces lèvres noircies par l'opium ressemble maintenant, ressemble de plus en plus au *sourire des idoles impériales oubliées au fond des pagodes qui s'écroulent* (p. 121. My emphasis)

¹³¹ There is no such word as 'cañha' in Vietnamese. However, Farrère's term probably derives from 'cà nhà' which normally means a house. Like other Vietnamese words appropriated by the French colonial nomenclature, 'cà nhà' takes on a negative meaning when used in colonial literature to mean, in this context, an indigenous place of promiscuity.

Here '[l']âme d'Extrême-Orient' is decadent in the sense of being over-civilised, having reached its peak point and facing its downfall (accentuated by the image of ruins which will be explored in Chapter Three) while the West is depicted as still being in its barbarian childhood. However, the decadent soul seems to paradoxically take on a positive note, as it is to be read in opposition to the earlier episode of the vulgarity of the French colonials, who are portrayed in this quote as the 'tyrants'.

If her 'people' dwell in ecstatic perversion, Anna's opiate dream, in contrast, is political:

Maintenant elle regarde le peuple des bêtes figées d'extase parmi les volutes noires qui roulent au-dessus du sol. Songe-t-elle, la Vierge veuve des Empereurs, au Destin traître qui lui a ravi l'obéissance d'un autre peuple, - plus nombreux, - d'un peuple humain pareil à ce peuple d'insectes dans son respect immobile et dans son adoration pétrifiée? Pleure-t-elle uniquement, avec des sanglots de rage, l'Empire mort, et le Sceptre mué en joug? (p. 122)

This 'peuple des bêtes' is unambiguously a metaphor for the Indochinese subalterns, who remain loyal to their defeated ruling class. In a way that coheres with the decadent attitude, the populace is undervalued and reduced to a bestial mass while the elite remains the only class in possession of dignity. However, this representation of bestial loyalty suggests an awareness of the existence of nationalist sentiment among the Indochinese people.

The narrator's interrogations at the end of the tale betrays the limits of colonial knowledge whilst acknowledging the resistance of the Indochinese Madonna against colonial control over her 'soul'. These are conducted in a manner that surpasses the scope of Orientalist discourse posited by Edward Said as an all-encompassing 'library or archive of information' allowing the 'Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics'.¹³²

Anna is a synecdoche of turn-of-the-century Indochina, defeated and subservient, yet resisting with the weapons of the weak. Her Indochinese body, fetishised as an object of

¹³² Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 41-42.

desire for the coloniser, resists their invasion first by mimicry and then by adopting the coloniser's own weapon of control – the medical and cultural discourse of syphilis – against its master. The opium den allows this displacement of colonial fetishism as it represents an ambiguous locus where contamination from the colonised to the coloniser, and vice versa, intermixes with fascination and repulsion. Within the opium den, the untamed forces embodied in the Indigenous vices cannot be completely controlled. Silent subterranean resistance, coming literally from the underground insects, can thus manifest its presence. Erotico-religious perversion – called '*algolagnia*' by Mario Praz –¹³³ which constitutes one of the favourite themes of decadent literature, takes on a political significance as 'subversive perversion'. Swarms of macabre exotic insects paradoxically pervert and subvert the colonial imaginary of the decadent *submissive* Indochina behind which survives a *resisting* Indochina.

Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry suggests that we can see the Europeanised Anna as the 'authorised version of otherness', one of 'the part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire'. Yet, she remains '*a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite*'.¹³⁴ Her mimicry manifests its slippage at nighttime through the decadent trope of opium; her perverse power exposes, in a reversal effect, the paradox, if not the ambivalent nature, of mimicry and the French ideology of assimilation, offering an ambiguous counter-narrative to the French presence in Indochina.

Anna's mimicry is part of a strategy of identity politics that adopts Western allure as a camouflage or performance. Anna's use of the Western 'vernish' is a conscious strategy: in the opium den, she drinks the Yunnan tea she disdained in the presence of Western guests at the beginning of the story: 'un thé vert de Yunnan (*sic*), qu'on dissimule aux barbares' (p. 114). Indeed, not long after the publication of *Fumée d'opium*, the French authorities were

¹³³ Praz, *The Romantic Agony*. See p. 321 for instance when Praz discusses the decadent intermingling of sadism and Catholicism.

¹³⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 122 and 126. Emphasis in the text.

forced to confront the question of which mode of domination to adopt - assimilation or association - specifically after a series of revolts in Annam in 1908.¹³⁵

Identity politics, as incarnated in Anna's double subjectivity, offers a terrain for this unequal fight at a time when French imperial rule was consolidating its authority and control at the beginning of the twentieth century. The title of the tale 'Les bêtes' thus takes on a reversed signification, prefiguring one of Aimé Césaire's arguments in his *Discours sur le colonialisme* in 1955, that colonisation works up to 'déciviliser' the coloniser in the literal sense of the term:

la colonisation, je le répète, déshumanise l'homme même le plus civilisé, [...] le colonisateur, qui, pour se donner bonne conscience, s'habitue à voir dans l'autre *la bête*, s'entraîne à le traiter en bête, tend objectivement à se transformer lui-même *en bête*. C'est cette action, ce choc en retour de la colonisation qu'il importe de signaler.¹³⁶

In regarding the colonised as beasts, the colonisers end up being transformed into beasts themselves. Farrère's 'Hors du silence', which will now be examined, can be read as partly echoing this process of contamination and dehumanisation.

'Hors du silence': From Containment to Contamination

'Hors du silence' numbers among the three stories alongside 'L'Église' and 'Ce qui se passa dans la maison du boulevard Thiers' which are set entirely in France, while in other stories, France is part of the décor along with other places (America and Europe more generally). As discussed in the beginning of the chapter, by the turn of the century, the art of 'tirer sur le bambou' was being exported from Indochina back to the homeland by soldiers and colonisers before spreading in clandestine public and private spaces,¹³⁷ as illustrated in the

¹³⁵ Fourniau, *Vietnam. Domination coloniale et résistance nationale*, pp. 512, 698-708.

¹³⁶ Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme, suivi du Discours sur la négritude* (Paris: Présence africaine, [1955] 2004), p. 12 and 21. Emphasis in the text.

¹³⁷ 'En 1905, on ne recense pas moins de 200 fumeries à Toulon. Mais il y avait aussi Marseille, Brest, Cherbourg et Bordeaux où les officiers de marine, conquis par l'opium à l'occasion d'un séjour en Asie, avaient suscité et acclimaté le plaisir et le commerce de ce que l'on appelait déjà l'"avarie d'Extrême-Orient"' (Liedekerke, *La Belle Époque de l'opium*, p. 184).

vogue of opiomania among the young French in ‘Ce qui se passa dans la maison du boulevard Thiers’.¹³⁸

‘Hors du silence’, the fifteenth story in *Fumée d’opium*, is exemplary in its exploration of the European unconscious in its contact with Indochinese opium as a transnational phenomenon. Merging Decadence with the motif of colonial contamination, the story of this retired soldier follows the classic trajectory of the return of French soldiers who bring colonialism back home, however with a morbid twist reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe and Guy de Maupassant.

‘Hors du silence’ depicts the life of a colonial soldier, ‘le vieux sergent de la légion’ (p. 206), who ends up being the keeper of a cemetery in his homeland in the Cévennes. He recounts his military life in different colonies (p. 207), but it was in Tonkin, his last colony, that he was initiated to opium smoking as an antidote for colonial boredom (p. 205). He recalls the first time he smelled opium from the opium factory in Saigon:¹³⁹ ‘une odeur jamais sentie, inquiétante et douce, – une odeur qui du premier coup m’entra par le nez jusqu’à l’âme et me subjuga. [...] et je demeurai jusqu’à l’aube adossé au mur, – de la fabrique d’opium – humant et reniflant tout ce que j’avais de souffle.’ (p. 208). Unlike the native opium addicts in Boissière’s tales whose opium was inferably from contraband trade, Farrère’s French coloniser is initiated to the ‘drogue’ directly through the colonial administration of ‘Régie de l’opium’. Generalised all across Indochina, as discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the monopoly of opium established in 1899 along with the *Régie* on salt and rice alcohol was destined to finance Paul Doumer’s ‘travaux de mise en œuvre’ of the colony, consolidating French rule in the region and enhancing its competitiveness in the Far East and the international scene.

¹³⁸ This tale recounts the possession of the female *courtisane*, ‘Ether’, by the spirit of the famous Héloïse d’Argenteuil.

¹³⁹ The ‘manufacture d’opium’ in Saigon was built in 1882 and became the unique official manufacture of the *Régie* from 1 January 1900, after the manufactures in Tonkin and Laos were closed in 1897 and 1899 respectively (Descours-Gatin, *Quand l’opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine*, p. 197).

Opiomania among the French colonials, although the subject of much discussion and fear for the French authorities, was not generalised even during ‘l’époque de la plus grande contagion’, i.e. the 1890s-1900s, according to Chantal Descours-Gatin.¹⁴⁰ However, in 1905, the French government addressed a confidential memorandum to the ‘lieutenant-gouverneur’ of Cochinchina warning that any civil servant found to be an opiate addict, following the decision of the ‘Conseil de santé’, would immediately be discharged from their position and sent back to France.¹⁴¹ This threat was never carried out. In the same manner, on 6 October 1907, the ‘Gouverneur général’ circulated the same warning prohibiting ‘tous fonctionnaires et agents européens de tous services de fumer l’opium sous peine de sanctions disciplinaires les plus sévères’.¹⁴² The attitude of the French colonial authorities at the turn of the century was thus equivocal, oscillating between a politics of containment vis-à-vis French colonials, and encouragement, through the monopoly of opium destined specifically for the Chinese and indigenous smokers. Against this historical backdrop, Farrère’s protagonist not only suggests this equivocal attitude, he also materialises the fear of colonial contamination, bringing his contaminated self beyond the boundaries of the Empire.

Back in Paris, while waiting to be given a promised ‘bureau de tabac’, he spends all the money for his retirement on opium: ‘On m’avait naturellement promis un bureau de tabac, – je boite pas, depuis la blessure de Son-Tay – mais c’est encore un fils de curé qui l’a eu! Alors, j’ai demandé le poste d’ici [dans les Cévennes], et je garde le cimetière’ (p. 210).¹⁴³ By depicting the tiring life he led during the colonial wars and once back in France, ‘moi [...] qui crevais de faim sur le pavé de Paris’ (p. 206), his story is representative of the difficulties

¹⁴⁰ *Quand l’opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine*, pp. 227-36.

¹⁴¹ Liedekerke, *La Belle Époque de l’opium*, p. 176.

¹⁴² Meyer, *La Vie quotidienne des Français en Indochine*, p. 263. It is difficult to measure the extent to which opiomania affected French colonials since historical sources, from medical texts to travel writing, often gave contradictory pictures and there were no statistics available. Opiomania among the French in Indochina seems to be more powerful in the colonial imaginary than it was in reality, probably due to the influence of early literature about Indochina examined in this chapter.

¹⁴³ The Son Tay battle forms one of the main events of Pouvoirville’s *L’Annam sanglant* discussed in Chapter Two.

colonial soldiers had to face after participating in colonisation, both financially and psychologically.

While colonial wars left him with somatic stigma, the opium theme allows the articulation of the psychological effects that colonial ‘trauma’ has left on the ex-colonial under the guise of opiate intoxication. It is the development of the theme of silence and the story’s soundscape that prepare that narrative for the fullest embodiment of this traumatised psyche at the end of the story.

The colonial authors as we have seen, particularly Boissière, pick up the motif of synaesthesia from Baudelaire in order to explore the effect of heightened senses that opium provokes for the smoker. While their purpose is often to create an atmosphere of exotic aestheticism in their stories, Farrère proposes something different in ‘Hors du silence’, namely a soundscape of modernity enhanced by opium and informed by colonialism. There are colonial sounds of Tonkin, the urban noises of Paris, and the natural, but worrying sounds of the cemetery in the countryside.

In Tonkin, there are ‘ces bruits imperceptibles’ of tigers, of pirates, of ‘génies de la forêt’ (p. 208-9). While the protagonist comes to know every sound in Tonkin, the urban sounds he experiences in Paris alienate him from the city: ‘Le tapage était tel; – jour et nuit, – que je n’arrivais plus à distinguer les bruits les uns des autres. C’était comme un orchestre formidable où tous les instruments hurlent d’accord. Seulement, du coup, je ne dormais plus’ (p. 210). One can hear the first line of Baudelaire’s poem, ‘À une passante’: ‘La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.’ ‘La vie moderne’ that the protagonist paints here, to use Baudelaire’s expression, does not concern only metropolitan life; it also reflects the colonial condition the French modern subject experiences. The typology of modern sounds follows his journey back and forth between the empire and the *métropole*. However, the intolerance to urban noises that the protagonist develops seems almost a reaction against

Baudelaire's praise of urban modernity and his credo 'épouser la foule'.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, at the cemetery, his sensibility to the myriad of sounds, and silence as we shall see, echoes Baudelaire's view of the artist as

un kaléidoscope doué de conscience, qui, à chacun de ses mouvements, représente la vie multiple et la grâce mouvante de tous les éléments de la vie. C'est un *moi* insatiable du *non-moi*, qui, à chaque instant, le rend et l'exprime en images plus vivantes que la vie elle-même, toujours instable et fugitive.¹⁴⁵

The kaleidoscopic mind of Baudelaire's artist reminds us of Boissière's macho-sadistic murderous scene in 'Comédiens ambulants' ('un de ces spectacles – or, soie et sang' (p. 90)).

In an echo of the Janus-faced Saigon in 'Les bêtes', two types of sounds are depicted at the graveyard where he installed his *fumerie*: diurnal and nocturnal sounds. During the day, there are tumultuous sounds from the natural and animal world as well as from the farms and industries nearby (p. 206). But, at night, he hears 'les autres bruits' (p. 206), 'moins clairs, moins simples, moins francs que les bruits du jour; – plus dangereux à entendre, plus angoissants, plus tortueux' (p. 211). He is aware that it is opium that transforms his auditory sensibility: 'jadis je n'entendais pas tant de choses', insomuch as he discovers that '[i]l n'y a pas de silence', that silence is 'l'utopie des gens qui ne fument pas' (p. 207). At the point where the story could turn into a ghost story akin to the musical piece of Saint-Saëns' *Danse macabre* (1874),¹⁴⁶ the protagonist at once assures the reader that 'non, je n'entends pas la ronde des squelettes. J'entends autre chose...' (p. 211). A troubling panoply of this 'autre chose' is then displayed in every nuance: 'les bruits interdits', 'les bruits macabres et blêmes', 'les bruits nocturnes qui ont peur du soleil', 'les bruits froids qui glaçant la chair des hommes et hérissent le poil de leur peau' (p. 211).

Taking a step further beyond the bestial 'grouillement' of 'Les bêtes', what he hears is revealed to be the imperceptible sounds of the decomposition of corpses: 'j'entends le bois

¹⁴⁴ Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 691.

¹⁴⁵ Baudelaire, p. 692. Emphasis in the text

¹⁴⁶ The composer Camille de Saint-Saëns visited Indochina in 1895 where he completed his opera *Brunhilda*. See <http://www.historicvietnam.com/saint-saens-in-saigon/> [accessed 9 October 2019].

des cercueil [...] les bières trop lourdes [...] les chairs pourries grouiller de vermine agile, et les os secs cliqueter [...] quinze cents cadavres – quinze cent bruits épouvantables [...] quinze cents gémissements d’outre tombe (*sic*) dont chacun insinue *son grain de folie dans ma tête ruinée* (p. 211-2. My emphasis). The hero’s consciousness resembles the Baudelairian ‘kaleidoscope’ with each movement capturing ‘la vie multiple’, except that this multiple life comes from underground, and not from urban modern life. His opium addiction makes the reader uncertain about the protagonist’s sanity. However, for him, ‘l’opium magique’ is the panacea that allows him to resist madness (p. 212).

Indeed, addressing the reader directly, he reveals the true reason why he stays ‘ferme au poste’:

C’est vrai, je ne vous ai pas dit: les pavots noirs poussent partout. Mais ce n’est qu’au Yunnan (*sic*), – et dans l’Inde aussi, – que l’opium en suite comme de la cire des ruches suintent les gouttes de miel. Et moi, j’ai vainement essayé de faire l’opium en France, jusqu’au jour où mes pavots tonkinois, plantés sur le cimetière gras de cadavres, ont retrouvé merveilleusement leur vertu. [...] – eh bien, mon opium noir et lisse vaut toutes les drogues de Bénarès et de la Chine. Et c’est le cimetière qui a fait le miracle. (p. 212-3)

He exposes here the failure of the politics of containment undertaken by the French authorities against contamination and addiction of their citizens. Moreover, while in Indochina, the opium of the ‘Régie’ officially comes from either India or Yunnan,¹⁴⁷ the Tonkinese seeds he illicitly smuggles back suggest the contraband opium the French authorities had been trying to fight against since the pacification of Tonkin from 1885. Opium escapes the control of the French State and degenerates the colonials inasmuch as they ‘export’ the ‘Trois Trésors de la Sagesse’¹⁴⁸ back to the homeland. From this perspective,

¹⁴⁷ At the time of the establishment of the *Régie de l’opium* in 1899, each region had its favourite opium supplier depending on several factors: the consumer’s taste, geographical closeness etc. Hence, China supplied Tonkin and Annam, and India supplied Cochinchina. From 1901, the administration of *Douanes et Régies* decided to introduce Chinese opium to Cochinchina and Indian opium to Tonkin, hence unifying the supply system. However, with the international campaign against opium, opium from Yunnan was banned in Cochinchina in 1908 and Annam in 1909, making India the only provider for Indochina (Descours-Gatin, *Quand l’opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine*, p. 192).

¹⁴⁸ The ‘Trois Trésors de la Sagesse’ is Claude Farrère’s own expression referring to ‘le fourneau, l’aiguille et la lampe’ (Claude Farrère, *L’Opium ou l’alcool* (Paris: Edouard Joseph, 1920), p. 12).

opium and Decadence can be read as a means of oppositionality, unsettling Imperialism from within. The truly geographically-boundless character of the Empire facilitates this transnational propagation while propelling the conquered Indochina into the rapidly expanding world economy.¹⁴⁹ The *fumerie* he installs at the cemetery is still Indochina, but transported to the *métropole* in its most dangerous form.

The story takes a completely macabre turn at the end when the protagonist reveals that one of the noises that he hears is the ‘sixième enterré vivant’ (p. 213). The reference to Poe’s horror story ‘The Premature Burial’ published in 1844 is striking. The ‘conditionnel présent’ and the hypothesis used to introduce this revelation at the beginning of this part, ‘Parce que si c’était vrai, ce serait le sixième enterré vivant’, are gradually replaced by the present tense and the verb ‘savoir’ to validate and attest the factuality of this gloomy phenomenon with lived experience (p. 214).

To accredit this ‘reality’, he refers back to his colonial experience of deer hunting in Tonkin. The beast is hit by the bullets, yet as he is approaching ‘la carcasse se relève et repart sur trois pattes, traînant au bout de ses boyaux son cœur et ses poumons! Ils sont pareils, mes enterrés vivants’ (p. 214-5). Hunting, a virile activity which forms part of the discourse of colonial regeneration, is picked up here in order to ironically attest to supernatural phenomena in France itself. Tonkin is portrayed as a land of irrationality that can provide an explanation for what science and European rationality cannot explain: ‘Vous croyez imbécilement, sur la foi de morticoles solennels, que la science d’aujourd’hui ne se trompe plus, et qu’elle n’enfouit que les cadavres?’ (p. 214). This valorization of a knowledge beyond science, inherent to Indochina, can be linked to the *fin-de-siècle* occult revival discussed in Chapter Three.

¹⁴⁹ Nankoe H., Gerlus J.-C., and Murray M. J., ‘The Origins of the Opium Trade and the Opium Régie in Colonial Indochina’, in *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming: Business Elites and the Emergence of the Modern State in Southeast Asia*, ed. by John G. Butcher and H. W. Dick (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 182-95.

The story ends on a humorous note: before retreating back to his pipe, the smoker makes a joke about how those buried alive cannot ‘galoper follement à travers les tombes’ (p. 215) like the Tonkinese deer because the soil is heavy enough to prevent this. Indeed, the sounds of the people buried alive in ‘Hors du silence’ echo the mysterious presence of ‘L’invisible’ in Maupassant’s short story ‘Le Horla’. Transnational opium and its contamination of the *métropole* operates at the level of the unconscious in the same manner as the presence of the ‘grand trois-mâts brésilien’ from the New World and its noxious influence on the villagers of Biessard on the banks of the Seine.

On one level, ‘Hors du silence’ recounts the hallucinatory visions of an opium addict. At a time when opiomania was neither criminalised nor entirely licit, the story explores and exposes the pathology of the new addiction coming from the East. During the nineteenth century, opium, along with other addictive substances, had been a subject of study, if not fascination, among doctors. The development of psycho-pathology and psychiatry focusing particularly on hysteria and madness attested that ‘la folie n’est pas *une*’.¹⁵⁰ Intermediary states that led to ‘aliénation’ - drug hallucinations among them - were subject to medical scrutiny. This medical discourse on alienation partly finds its literary expression in the exploration of irrational subjectivity within ‘modernité littéraire’ which Farrère’s text was seen to partake in as mentioned. The narrative technique of ‘monologue intérieur’ used to enhance the sentiment of claustrophobia of the homodiegetic narrator in this tale announces the technique of ‘stream of consciousness’, which came to the fore in twentieth-century modernist fiction.

This macabre tale can be read, on another level, as an exploration of the unconscious of the uprooted ex-colonial. The view that opium is a panacea against tropical isolation and helps to penetrate the indigenous mind, which Jules Boissière defends in his *Propos d’un*

¹⁵⁰ Bancquart, Marie-Claire, ‘Introduction’, in Guy de Maupassant, *Le Horla et autres contes cruels et fantastiques* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1989), p. xx.

intoxiqué, falls short in this case, since the result is the contamination of the coloniser by Oriental vices. Farrère's story thus exposes the modern subject in the colonial context as traumatized by the memory of colonial wars, the experience of dislocation and that of the return home.

Opium, through the motif of contamination, reverses, or at least destabilises, the traditional movement of the Empire. French Indochina travels back from the East to the West, but also around the world in *Fumée d'opium*. Colonisation is thus not seen as binary but as a network within which domination and control are constantly put on trial, specifically by the strategy of oppositionality already suggested by Boissière's 'critical Decadence'.

Reading *Fumée d'opium* in relation to the context of Farrère's life can also shed light on the young Farrère's position on colonialism. His early political position seems to be at odds with the categorically colonialist stance he later took in the name of patriotism. In *Mes voyages* (1924) and *Une jeune fille voyagea* (1925), his last Indochinese novel, the colonialist stance operates as the framework of his thought. In the latter in particular, Indochina came to embody the land from which national energy could be regenerated and regained. In contrast, his early position was often provocative, at times potentially counter-hegemonic. Decadent opium constantly threatens to provoke ideological breaches, through its ambivalent power of attraction and contamination.

This difference of posture can be explained not as much in the radical shift of ideological stance *vis-à-vis* colonisation as in Farrère's intellectual association of opium with creativity, aestheticism and sensuality, like many writers in the decadent vein. In contrast to Levantine opium, the unconventional link of Indochinese opium with ancient wisdom and textual knowledge, even esoteric philosophy, embodied in the character of the 'sage lettré' makes this decadent connection even more appealing to these authors. Hence, by the end of

the 1910s when opium was increasingly seen as a social danger in the eyes of the public,¹⁵¹ Farrère wrote an apology of opium in reaction to the prohibition campaign. In ‘L’Opium ou l’alcool’, he differentiates Romantic opium eating from Far Eastern opium smoking, emphasising that the latter is harmless.¹⁵² He could vouch for this based on his decade-long opium addiction, which probably began in Indochina around 1897-8 until his last pipes around 1912-3.¹⁵³

If in the *métropole*, the ‘loi du 12 juillet 1916’ marked the end of what Liedekerke calls ‘la Belle Époque de l’opium’,¹⁵⁴ the French monopoly on opium in Indochina ended only in the wake of the collapse of French rule in 1954. Ironically, however, the opium trade continued to partly finance post-colonial struggles in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam at least until 1961.¹⁵⁵

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While Bonnetain dwells on his ethnocentrism and Boissière’s *critical Decadence* is informed by the doubtful future of French colonialism in the region, Farrère belongs to another world order. The Indochina that he came to know was no longer an unfamiliar Indochina, but a colonial Indochina caught between tradition and modernisation at the crossroads of competing Imperial powers and the new world economy. This Indochina was aware not only of its own subservience, but also of its entrance into the modern world. The trope of

¹⁵¹ The anti-opium discourse did not begin to gain the attention of French public and authorities until the end of the 1900s. A series of incidents took place in favour of the prohibition: in 1906, the anti-drug law of 1845 was applied for the first time against a sergeant of the colonial infantry; in 1907-8, there was the scandal of the ‘Ulmo Affair’ and, a couple of months later, the accident of the ship *La Nive* in which the opium addiction of the soldiers on duty was seen as the cause. This series of incidents, consolidated by pressure from the international community against opium, led to more severe measures from the mid-1910s in France. The first International conference on opium took place in 1909 in Shanghai and led to the vote for an international convention during the Hague conference in 1911 in an attempt to control the production, trade and consumption of opium, morphine and cocaine.

¹⁵² *L’Opium ou l’alcool*, p. 8. *L’Opium ou l’alcool* constitutes the preface Farrère wrote for the republication of Alfred de Musset’s translation of *L’Anglais mangeur d’opium*. The text was published separately in 30 copies, numbered with the name of the thirty individuals who had pre-ordered a copy. The Bibliothèque nationale François Mitterrand owns the copy no. 4 ordered by Ferdinand Vandérem.

¹⁵³ *L’Opium ou l’alcool*, p. 16.

¹⁵⁴ *La Belle Époque de l’opium*, p. 208.

¹⁵⁵ Christian C. Lentz, ‘Cultivating Subjects: Opium and Rule in Post-Colonial Vietnam’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 51 (2017), 879-918.

Indochinese opium as explored by the three authors follows this trajectory into colonial modernity, from the first colonial contact marked by colonial wars to the emerging globalised Indochina. If decadent opium became a cliché as soon as it emerged in literature about Indochina, it has always retained its ambivalence and potential for oppositional counter-narrative arising between containment and contamination, control and temptation.

* * *

Chapter Two

The Erotic Cartography of French Indochina: The *Femme Fatale*, the Androgyne and the Homosexual

Overlapping with the topos of opium, decadent eroticism is another central theme in colonial literature of Indochina. Sexual desire and the mastery of sexuality throughout the imperial world have been recognised by critics of colonial discourse and postcolonial studies to represent not merely a metaphor of European superiority. Rather, they constitute one of the main means by which colonial domination and the consolidation of colonial rule are made possible. Colonisation is underpinned by imperatives that give definition to the racial and sexual boundaries between coloniser and colonised.¹

The Orientalist premise, according to which the West is represented as virile and the East as effeminate, is ubiquitous in the speeches and writings of colonial agents of the time.² decadent sexuality as it is deployed in colonial literature of Indochina is, in contrast, constantly engaged in ever-changing negotiations of this colonialist framework.

¹ Catherine Hall, 'Of Gender and Empire: Reflections on the Nineteenth Century', in *Gender and Empire*, ed. by Philippa Levine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 46-75, and Ann Laura Stoler, 'Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-century Colonial Cultures', *American Ethnologist*, 16 (1989), 634-60 (p. 636).

² See Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, the renowned theorist of French colonial expansion, who writes about the regenerative power of the colony in terms of the renewal of the coloniser's virile force (cited in Said, *Orientalism*, p. 219). For Indochina specifically, Maurice Rondet-Saint in his *Dans notre Empire jaune* (1907) sees virility as a means of maintaining Indochina under French control: 'Sachons être forts, confiants en nous, virils. Et l'Indochine restera à jamais terre française' (quoted in Taraud, Christelle, 'La virilité en situation coloniale, de la fin du XVIIIe siècle à la Grande Guerre', in *Histoire de la virilité*, ed. by Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Virello, 3 vols (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 2011), vol. 2, p. 333).

Decadent obsessions with alternative, non-reproductive sexualities and deviant sexual acts are commonly viewed as challenges to bourgeois sexual norms in the metropolitan context. However, they take on a new significance when confronted with the complex sexual practices in the supposedly decadent colony of Indochina. What is viewed as subversive in decadent metropolitan literature becomes less so, if not normative, in the Indochinese setting, which is viewed as a site of licentious sexuality. At times, the decadent sexuality projected onto the colonised appears to be neatly mapped over the racial and sexual hierarchy of the empire. Within this hierarchy, the supremacy of the ‘hypervirile’ white coloniser is secured both at the expense of the ‘demasculined’ yellow men and through the possession of the female colonised’s body. At other times, however, the fear of contamination and the ambivalent attraction inherent in Decadence reveal uncertainties and anxieties over the French colonial identity and the boundaries assigned by this identity.

By viewing colonialism as a ‘desiring machine’,³ this chapter sets out to explore the cartography of colonial desire as imagined in the colonial literature of Indochina in its close connection with questions of racial difference, the regenerative role of colonisation, as well as the *fin-de-siècle* cultural and medical discourses pertaining to sexuality.⁴ The three decadent ‘types’ representing ‘sexual anarchy’⁵ – the *femme fatale*, the androgyne and the homosexual – will be the focus of my discussion as they occupy prominent positions in the fabric of Indochinese colonial eroticism.

³ ‘Colonialism, in short, was not only a machine of war and administration, it was also a desiring machine. [...] it was itself the instrument that produced its own darkest fantasy – the unlimited and ungovernable fertility of “unnatural” unions’ (Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 98).

⁴ The concept of ‘gender’ is valuable in analysis of sexual practices though there is some danger of anachronism with regards to the period that interests us. From the nineteenth-century outlook, a person’s biological sex determined his or her gender and sexuality, and hence identity. See Robert Nye’s warrant against an anachronistic risk of using the modern concept of gender for the nineteenth century: ‘despite the clear analytical value gender possesses, we risk misunderstanding how individuals and societies constructed or experienced sexual identity in the past if we substitute gender for the older category of sex or use gender and sex interchangeably as though they were the same thing’ (*Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour in Modern France* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 5).

⁵ Elaine Showalter borrows the expression from the definition of the 1880s and 1890s provided by the novelist George Gissing (*Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 3).

THE INDOCHINESE COLONIAL *FEMME FATALE*

The Fatal Woman or *femme fatale* has a long tradition in the European imaginary and can be traced back to the Hebraic Lilith and the biblical Eve. Cleopatra of Egypt was the paradigmatic *femme fatale* from the Orient. However, the *femme fatale* in her modern form has been mostly informed by the decadent sensibility of *fin-de-siècle* France. It was from this point on that she became English, European, and transatlantic.⁶ Before moving on to the discussion of the colonial *femme fatale* in Indochina, a general definition of the metropolitan *femme fatale* will lay the groundwork for my analysis.

Even though ‘there is no single *femme fatale*’,⁷ critics have generally agreed on many of the traits specific to the *fin-de-siècle femme fatale* as she is represented in decadent literature and art. The *femme fatale* is first and foremost characterised by her transgressive sexuality which defies normative femininity as prescribed by the moral and medical discourses of the time. Her powerful seductiveness stems from her ‘excessive and aggressive sexuality’.⁸ Her fatality is predicated on the *male* perception of her as being threatening and fatal; she is ‘la *femme fatale-à-l’homme*’.⁹ Beautiful but dangerous, she lures men into ruin, decline and

⁶ It is noteworthy that the French word *femme fatale* has survived in its original form across different languages, contexts and times. This attests to the power of this decadent type in the wider European imagination. For a selection of studies of the *femme fatale* in European and American nineteenth-century literature and visual arts, see Patrick J. Quinn, *Patriarchy in Eclipse: The Femme Fatale and the New Woman in American Literature and Culture 1870-1920* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Dominique Maingueneau, ‘Esthétique de la femme fatale’, in *Fatalités du Féminin*, ed. by Jacques André and Anne Juranville (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002), Pascale Lacroix, ‘L’Image de la femme fatale dans le double miroir de la littérature et de la peinture fin de siècle’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Paris IV-Sorbonne, 1997), Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), Virginia M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (New York: Whitston, 1983), and Patrick Bade, *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* (London: Mayflower Books, 1979).

⁷ Elizabeth Kolbinger Menon, *Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 4.

⁸ Sharon Larson, ‘Femme de Siècle: Malevolent Female Sexuality, Masculinity and Linguistic Authority in the Decadent Novel’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Department of French Studies, Brown University, 2009), p. 2. Larson’s thesis focuses on the subversive ways in which the decadent *femme fatale* interferes with the male protagonist’s artistic creation and linguistic power in the fiction of Octave Mirbeau, Camille Lemonnier, Catulle Mandès and Marie Kryszynska. In usurping masculine creative power, the *femme fatale* acquires and affirms her own linguistic and creative artistry, that is to say a command over language, which was almost exclusively reserved to male privilege at the turn of the century.

⁹ Mireille Dottin-Orsini, *Cette femme qu’ils disent fatale: textes et images de la misogynie fin-de-siècle* (Paris: Grasset, 1993), p. 17.

degeneracy, if not death. Her lethal power which lies in her ‘sexual fatalism’¹⁰ can thus be understood as both literal and metaphorical. As a ‘type’, the *femme fatale* is often deprived of subjectivity and depth while being depicted as impenetrable and frigid, not so much in the sexual but rather in the epistemological sense of unattainable knowledge.

This ‘resistance’ partly invests her with masculine attributes, visible in both her behaviour and physique while her male victims, having acquired a sado-masochistic taste for this impenetrable woman, are ‘emasculated’, that is to say ‘deprived of virility, castrated’.¹¹ These men are often depicted as effeminate, and thus decadent. In this sense, the *femme fatale*’s transgressive femininity defines, by way of contrast, decadent masculinity. We will see how this binary sexual representation comes to be problematic in the colonial context.

The last, but perhaps primary, aspect of the decadent *femme fatale* that is particularly relevant to my study lies in her dual characteristics, which embrace both the ‘modern’ menace and the mythically and exotically rooted, and often Oriental, mystery. The Romantics had frequently associated exoticism with the ‘Belle Dame sans merci’,¹² even when there had been no established type of *femme fatale* just yet. It is with Gautier and Flaubert that exoticism, eroticism and aestheticism coalesce to create the Fatal Woman.¹³

Alongside Gautier’s recurring ‘Égyptiennes’ that represent his *femme fatale* par excellence, Flaubert’s *Salammô* (1864) constitutes the most exuberant expression of the Oriental fantasy in its intermingling of exoticism with perversity. The mystical and sensual figure of Salammô herself consolidates the iconography of the Oriental jewelled *femme fatale* in a foretaste of and may have helped to inspire Gustave Moreau’s paintings of Salomé. As

¹⁰ Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death*, p. ix.

¹¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives two definitions of the transitive verb ‘to emasculate’: ‘to deprive of virility, to castrate (a male person or animal)’ and ‘to deprive of strength and vigour; to weaken, make effeminate and cowardly’.

¹² The ‘Belle Dame Sans Merci’ is the title of John Keat’s poem written in 1819. Keats borrows the title from the fifteenth-century poem by Alain Chartier. Although the poem outlines ‘historical exoticism’, and not ‘Oriental exoticism’ per se, the ‘belle dame’ in this poem has often been taken by critics as one of the emblematic ‘exotic’ *femmes fatales* during the Romantic period.

¹³ Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, p. 210.

Charles Bernheimer convincingly argues, the Orient in Flaubert's novel, like every other mode of totalisation – subjectivity, history, causality, and the *femme fatale* herself –, remains unknown, blocked, inaccessible.¹⁴ Flaubert's ambivalent strategy of invitation and resistance, exposure and concealment, can be of interest to us as the template for analysing the *femme fatale* in colonial literature.

However, in the wake of this late-romantic Oriental *femme fatale*, there was a geographical shift specific to the *fin-de-siècle* colonial imagination of the *femme fatale*. The Levantine women were gradually replaced by Indochinese and African *femmes fatales* in colonial literature.¹⁵ This move, which can partly be explained by the conquest of new colonies in Africa and the Far East, coincides with the aesthetic shift in literature, namely from Romanticism towards Decadence, mirroring the aesthetico-materialist shift from Romantic oral consumption of opium to the decadent smoked opium already discussed in Chapter One.

The decadent *femme fatale* in Indochinese *fin-de-siècle* colonial literature is often projected onto the native women, and rarely the white woman.¹⁶ Like her metropolitan counterparts,¹⁷ the Indochinese colonial *femme fatale* can be read partly as representing the erotic site of male masochistic desire for perversity and anxiety over masculinity. At the same time, she stands for the displaced site of metropolitan concerns about the future of the French nation at a time when the increasingly established *République* was confronted with the conjoined threats of degeneration and moral decay felt by many as being manifest in changes to sexuality.

¹⁴ *Decadent Subjects*, p. 55.

¹⁵ Yee, *Clichés de la femme exotique*, p. 180. In metropolitan-focused literature, the vaguely Oriental/Middle Eastern *femme fatale* figure remains nonetheless important.

¹⁶ Two notable exceptions are Elsa de Faulwitz in Henri Daguerches's *Kilomètre 83* (Pondicherry: Kailash 'Les Exotiques', [1913] 2013) and Marthes Abel in Claude Farrère's *Les Civilisés* (1905) whose New Woman characteristics overlap with her *femme fatale* side to form a modern decadent, yet exotic, subject in an echo of emerging feminism in Europe. For the discussion of her exoticism, see Yee, *Clichés de la femme exotique*, pp. 107–15.

¹⁷ To quote only the notable metropolitan *femmes fatales*, there were Pierre Louÿs's Conchita, Rémy de Gourmont's Lilith, Moreau's Salomé, Rachilde's Mademoiselle Raoule de Vénérande, Octave Mirbeau's Clara.

However, more importantly, her significance is best understood in connection with colonial ideology concerning the regeneration of both the French and the colonised races as well as colonial policy pertaining to the role of French women in the colony. If the *femme fatale* figure is conjured up, in an anti-decadent manner, as a foil for the re-affirmation of the coloniser's virility and the sexual and racial boundaries of French colonial rule along with it, her decadent allure often threatens to unsettle the very same terms upon which her existence is built. The ambivalent nature of the *femme fatale* in her two indigenous versions – the *congai* and the *métisse* – will be discussed in their evolving interactions with French cultural and colonial politics, medical discourses concerning colonial sexuality and interracial mixing as well as the epistemological question of racial difference.

The *Congai*

Enfant respectueux toujours de ce que j'aime,
Sphinx impassible qui n'interroge jamais
Et dont le seul regard me pose son problème,
N'as-tu pas deviné, dis-moi, que je t'aimais
D'un amour de blasé des jours de décadence,¹⁸

In French Indochina, as well as Dutch Java and Sumatra, the colonised concubine 'formed the dominant domestic arrangement in colonial cultures through the early 20th century.'¹⁹ The literary figure of the native mistress, the *congai*, who lives with the French coloniser 'to run his household and furnish his bed'²⁰ emerged at the same time as the advent of Indochinese colonial literature and came to be one of the most enduring stock images associated with 'la vie large' in Indochina alongside opium.²¹

¹⁸ 'La con-gai' (1887) by Jules Boissière, in Victor Le Lan, *Essai sur la littérature coloniale* (Hanoi: Cahier Indochinois, 1907), p. 17. See Annex 2.

¹⁹ Stoler, 'Making Empire Respectable', 634-60 (p. 637).

²⁰ Jennifer Yee, 'Recycling the "Colonial Harem"? Women in postcards from French Indochina', *French Cultural Studies* (2004), 5-19 (p. 14).

²¹ As early as in Paul Bonnetain's *L'Opium* (1886), the *congai* appears as part of the décor of French men's domestic life in Hanoi during the period of the pacification. And, in Jules Boissière's *Fumeurs d'opium* (1896), a French soldier in the short story 'Les génies du mont Tan-Vien' assigned to an up-country post lives with his *congai* and their mixed-blood child.

Assuming the double role of mistress and servant, *congai* is the French colonial version and translation of the Vietnamese word ‘con gai’ which simply means ‘young woman, female child’. A product of the colonial condition, this invented ‘type’ came to represent ‘une race de femmes annamites, produit de la colonisation’.²² According to Frank Proschan, there was a semantic shift ‘from “woman” to “wife” to “mistress” to “whore,” ultimately accomplishing linguistically the degradation of all womanhood to whoredom’.²³ It seems that there existed two terms for the Indochinese concubine depending on the professional situation of her French protector: ‘La co, “tante” ou “mademoiselle”, est une congai dont le “protecteur” est un militaire. On dit congai pour la concubine d’un fonctionnaire et co pour celle d’un militaire’.²⁴ However, in colonial literature, almost all Indochinese concubines as well as prostitutes are amalgamated under the term, *congai*.

Concubinage between French men and native women resulted in a set of neologisms derived from the noun *congai*: the verb *encongayer*, the action of *encongayment* and the noun for the French man who takes up a *congai*, *un encongayé*. This linguistic ‘enrichment’ of colonial nomenclature attests to the institutionalisation of an informal, yet widespread, practice. Like opium, the *congai* was considered as a panacea against the *mal du pays*, but also an agent for ‘acculturation’ via initiating the virile coloniser into the indigenous culture, mores and language. This cultural practice was thus condoned by corporate and administrative authorities as a *means* for ‘la survie des colons dans un milieu hostile’ as well as a *tool* for imperial domination (through mastery of knowledge about native culture), at least during the early period of French colonisation in Indochina.²⁵

²² Nguyễn Xuân Tuê, ‘Congai une race de femmes annamites, produit de la colonisation’, in *Indochine: reflets littéraires* (Rennes: Presse universitaires de Rennes, 1992), vol. 3, pp. 69-77.

²³ Proschan, “Syphilis, Opiomania, and Pederasty”, 610-36 (p. 614). There exist several ways of transcribing this word in French, *congai*, *congai*, *congaye*, *con gai* or *con gai* etc. I adopt one of the most frequent forms, *congai*. However, when in quotations, the original form used by the authors is retained.

²⁴ Isabelle Tracol-Huynh, ‘Désir et répulsion: les prostituées du Tonkin’, in *La Colonisation des corps de l’Indochine au Viet Nam*, ed. by François Guillemot and Agathe Larcher-Goscha (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2014), pp. 200-28.

²⁵ Isabelle Tracol-Huynh, ‘La Prostitution au Tonkin colonial, entre races et genres’, *Genre, sexualité et société*, 2 (Autumn 2009) <<http://gss.revues.org/1219>> [accessed 10 January 2017]. This view is also confirmed in Malleret, *L’Exotisme indochinois*, vol. 2, p. 43.

In an echo of Des Esseintes' exotic aestheticism, the *congai* is often depicted as part of decadent diletantism. She is an exotic 'bibelot' that enriches the decadent coloniser's collection of exotic objects. Claude Farrère's novel *Les Civilisés* (1905) encapsulates this representation of the decadent *congai*.²⁶ The story centres around the lives of three French expatriates in Saigon with the native people relegated to the background. Mévil, the decadent seductive doctor, possesses a *congai* who appears on the very first pages of the novel as part of the 'luxueusement' (p. 7) exotic, and with her, erotic décor: Mévil 'caressa du doigt le sein de la femme à travers le ke-hao de soie noire' (p. 8). Next to her, the 'coureurs tonkinois' are there only as a decorative object in the same manner as Mévil's 'pousse très élégant, laqué et argenté' with which they form 'un coquet équipage'. This exotic 'équipage' objectifies the native men and women, amalgamating them with their cultural artefacts.

As such, in an unexpected contrast to the 'bric-à-bracomaniac' that was in vogue in metropolitan France, Mévil's diletante collection of Indochinese 'bibelots' reveals its true violence when replaced within its original context of colonisation. Decadent obsessions with exotic trinkets are revealed to be a cultural practice that relies on dehumanisation and uneven power relations between the collector/coloniser and the collected/colonised. As Mireille Naturel notes, 'Dès les premières lignes, l'esthétisme s'affirme dans un contexte de domination coloniale'.²⁷ In other words, the first scene, whose narrative function is to present Mévil's refined taste and gracious mannerisms, is set in the political reality that makes possible the aesthetic refinement of the French doctor.

If, by the turn of the century, in the same way as the opium theme, the *congai-bibelot* came to form a stock metonym for decadent Indochina, this ambivalent portrayal of 'encongayment' – straddling decadent aestheticism and colonial domination – is further problematicised through her *femme fatale* traits.

²⁶ Claude Farrère, *Les Civilisés* (Paris: Kailash, [1905] 2004). It was first published in Paris by Paul Ollendorff.

²⁷ Mireille Naturel, 'Claude Farrère, Prix Goncourt 1905', in *Proust et le fait littéraire. Réception et création* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010), pp. 111-21 (p. 113).

The young French civil officer Alain in Myriam Harry's novel, *Petites épouses* (1902),²⁸ 'devant son ennui' and following the example of his colleagues at the office, decides to take up a *congai* (p. 36). A long episode of *congai* hunting thus begins. In the end, he encounters a young girl in an 'auberge riveraine' during his promenade (p. 43) and decides to pick her as his *congai*.

Thi-Moï or 'Mademoiselle Frisson-de-Bambou' is a fourteen-year-old Sino-Indochinese girl, or 'ce qu'on appelle en Cochinchine, où ce mélange est très fréquent, une Min-Huong' (p. 49). After her Chinese father went back to China and her Vietnamese mother disappeared, she was raised by madame Nguyen Thi-Tam who 'cherchait à récupérer avantageusement les frais de cette éducation' (p. 49-50). The traditional wedding is arranged quickly and the economic aspect of the union is made clear for every concerned party:

Il éprouvait pour elle le sentiment d'un amateur pour *un bibelot très rare, pourchassé à grand frais et un peu illicitement*. Un léger remords se mêlait à sa tendre impatience. Certes, il n'aurait pas épousé Thi-Moï malgré elle; mais n'avait-il pas acheté son consentement par des cadeaux, et séduit sa vanité par des égards auxquels les fillettes annamites ne sont guère accoutumées de la part des Blancs? (p. 53-4. My emphasis)

Despite, or perhaps because of, the 'léger remords' – an allusion to European morality and the 'mercantile' nature of this exchange–,²⁹ the idea of an illicit transaction excites Alain even more. His white superiority is called upon to justify and, at the same time is confirmed through, this acquisition. For him, 'la petite congaie' (p. 59) is his 'poupée' (p. 55), a decorative and disposable fetish, if not a docile and sweet 'marionnette' (p. 88).

²⁸ Myriam Harry, *Petites épouses* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1902). Myriam Harry was the pseudonym of Maria Rosette Shapira (1869-1958), an active and interesting female writer at the turn of the century. Born in Jerusalem of a German mother and a Ukrainian father, the family moved back to Germany in 1884 after her father's suicide. She started her literary career in Paris, propelled particularly by her role with Marguerite Durand's first entirely female-staffed newspaper *La Fronde*. After a voyage in Indochina and the Far East from 1899-1902, she wrote her first novel, *Petites épouses*. First published in *La Revue de Paris*, the novel was a commercial success and was re-published by Calmann Lévy in 1902. She sent a copy to Huysmans who first thought that she was a man and called her 'Le Loti mâle'. He wrote back with admiration and enthusiasm. Their friendship lasted until Huysmans's death in 1907 (Myriam Harry, *La Petite fille de Jérusalem* (Paris: Éditions de Malassis, [1914] 2016), p. 10). In 1905, her novel *La Conquête de Jérusalem*, published in 1903, was nominated for the first 'Vie Heureuse' prize, later 'Prix Femina'.

²⁹ Alain does not seem too concerned about her youth, but more about the commercial transaction, which is paradoxically part of the process of acquiring a 'bibelot'.

The critic Louis Malleret makes precisely the same remark about this ‘colonialist’ aspect of ‘encongayement’ as it is conceived by the male colonisers: ‘Le sentiment du prestige de la race blanche fait que l’Européen n’envisage l’amour que comme une des formes de la domination. La possession fait partie de l’exercice de l’autorité. Il y a, dans l’instinct qui rapproche le Blanc de la femme indigène, quelque chose – l’idéal chevaleresque étant exclu – de la notion féodale de la suprématie du maître et seigneur.’³⁰

However, a constant tension in Thi-Moï’s portrait quickly resurfaces as she represents for Alain both a ‘bibelot’ and *femme fatale*, accessible yet mysterious, submissive yet defiant at the same time. At a meeting-point between the primitive feline-like woman and the familiar frame of reference of the Oriental sphinx-like *femme fatale* (p. 318), Thi-Moï comes to embody an Indochinese type, ‘perfide Congai’³¹ – infidelity, the dubious paternity of the *métis* child, addiction to gambling, avidity, deceit –: ‘elle ressemblait à une idole sournoise et perverse’ (p. 271). As such, Thi-Moï represents an impenetrable and frigid enigma, the traditional *femme fatale*. Yet, in a way characteristic of colonial and Indochinese Decadence, her impenetrability is doubly articulated through the decadent World-History framework and a biological concept of race. Her ‘secret’ or ‘enigma’ is attributed to her ‘race’ or even ‘espèce’, an essentialist concept itself drawn from the scientific racialism that was common currency at the time:

Et Alain songeait à cette nation millénaire et vaincue, au milieu de laquelle il vivait, dont il commençait à apprendre la langue, dont il étudiait l’histoire, dont il avait épousé une fille et dont il ne savait rien. [...] De ce peuple [...] mais de son âme, de sa pensée, de ses sentiments, nous ignorons tout. Et probablement, jamais nous ne pénétrerons le secret de ce sourire poli, ni l’énigme de ses yeux narquois. Un mur infranchissable l’isole de nous ; le mur des espèces, dont l’une s’inbume dans son passé et dont l’autre se régénère par son présent. [...] il crut tenir dans ses bras, avec le cœur de sa

³⁰ Malleret, *L’Exotisme indochinois*, vol. 2, p. 47.

³¹ In his poem, ‘Les “Français d’Asie”’ published in 1913, René Crayssac (1883-1940) posits that the *congai*, along with ‘le vieux mandarin’ and ‘le *Nhà-quê*’ or the native farmer-worker, forms a clichéd trio that represents ‘l’âme indigène’: ‘Mais nous voulons chanter aussi l’âme indigène, / Ses goûts et ses désirs, ses amours et ses haines, / Chanter la perfide *Congai*, / L’ébène de ses dents, l’hibiscus de ses lèvres’ (*Sous les flamboyants* (Hanoi: n. pub., 1913), p. 84. Emphasis in the text). Colonial agents, observers and travellers often portrayed the Indochinese women, and also men, as ‘ugly’, partly because of their customs of betel chewing and their lacquered teeth (mentioned in this poem), two different practices that the European often confused and conflated into the same thing.

petite épouse, le cœur de toute *cette race immuable et incompréhensible*; et presque dévotement, il se pencha sur cette bouche froide et rouge comme deux perles de corail et qui resta close à son baiser...’ (p. 76-78. My emphasis).

This compelling passage contrasts the recurrent motif of the ‘unknowable other’³² inherent to the *fin-de-siècle* exotic *femme fatale* with the philanthropic aspect of colonialism, that is, the motif of ‘la conquête des cœurs’. As a synecdoche for the entire Indochinese race, the impenetrable *congai-femme fatale* is thus politicised as a challenge for the coloniser to ‘conquer’ her heart (p. 95) and her people along with it. Similarly, in an anti-decadent manner, Alain is portrayed in relation to her as a ‘humanist’ virile coloniser as well as the synecdoche of the French civilising mission. The relationship between France and Indochina, more than any other colonies, is often invested with affect in this way.³³ Colonialism is thus a desiring machine often camouflaged under philanthropic impulses.

Despite Alain’s efforts, Thi-Moï remains a mystery so that her resistance is at once affective, political and epistemological, revealing the limits of Western knowledge of racial difference and those of colonial domination. Alain attempts to provide a biological explanation for this resistance as ‘un retour vers sa race’, namely the defeat of Chinese blood under the influence of her Annamite race, in conformity with the colonial hierarchy of race (p. 280).³⁴ Yet, this resistance cannot be contained within the racialised discourse and goes beyond her death. In the end, she runs away and disappears for four days, only to return sick

³² Yee, *The Colonial Comedy*, pp. 200-18. See also Tzvetan Todorov’s account of Pierre Loti’s exotic novels in *Nous et les autres: la réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), pp. 341-55.

³³ *À la conquête des cœurs* is a monograph written by Auguste Pavie in 1921. This essay develops another aspect of the French civilising mission with vocabulary invested with affects. Alongside material and infrastructural development, according to him, the French have to conquer the hearts of the indigenous people in order to establish a viable French-Asian collaboration constitutive of a true and lasting empire. On this, see Matt K. Matsuda, *Empire of Love: Histories of France and the Pacific* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³⁴ Chinese civilisation was often considered more sophisticated than the Indochinese one because of its ancient and glorious past. Alain is obsessed throughout the story with the mixed-blood or ‘hybrid’ nature of Thi-Moï. Her positive nature is attributed to her Chinese heritage whilst her negative traits are not only attributed to Indochina but also considered representative of the entire Indochinese race. However, the valorisation of the Chinese ‘race’ in the context of Indochina was perhaps partly because the Chinese were only a minority in Indochina and were not directly the target of the French conquest. When the Chinese are encountered in China the negative view of their race remains more dominant.

and dies of a mysterious illness with him at her bedside (p. 291).³⁵ The romantic ‘bon colonisateur’ Alain discovers her debts after her death and is forced to sell all his possessions to pay them back. The novel ends with Alain’s preparations for the voyage back to France. He takes with him the only thing Thi-Moï had left him, her ‘carte de visite’: ‘Un bout de papier *indéchiffrable*, une fleur *mystique*, c’était tout ce qui lui restait de sa petite épouse’ (p. 327-8. My emphasis). The *congai-femme fatale* outlives her death as the indecipherable and mystical flower that evokes the exotic lotus Salomé holds in her hand as the symbol of feminine power and castration in Gustave Moreau’s paintings.

Thi-Moï embodies what Jennifer Yee calls the ‘topos of epistemological failure’, that is, ‘the failure of objective knowledge to deal with racial and cultural difference’ which is accompanied by ‘anxiety about the identity of the colonizer himself’.³⁶ Confronted with the temptation of the *Extrême-Orient* qualified as ‘meurtrière’ (p. 326), the coloniser who is supposed to assume the role of the anti-decadent hero ends up as a ‘decadent hero’, defined by George Ross Ridge as ‘weak’, ‘passive’, devirilized and caught in a ‘passionate death-struggle’ with the *femme fatale*.³⁷ At the same time, his failure to conquer the unknowable Thi-Moï amounts to a crumbling of his identity as the regenerating and regenerated coloniser: ‘Décharné, livide, les yeux bistrés, il ne ressemblait guère au jeune homme vigoureux et frais qui, quatre années auparavant, était parti à la conquête de la belle aux cocotiers dormant...’ (p. 326).

While the *congai-bibelot* fulfils a utilitarian function within the colonial project, the *femme fatale* resists and undermines the rigid colonial divides through the trope of

³⁵ This mysterious illness can be read as a reference to syphilis. The widespread anxiety about syphilis has been identified as crucial to the construction of the myth of the destructive woman. See Dominique Maingueneau, *Féminin fatal* (Paris: Descartes, 1999), p. 13, and Leslie Choquette, ‘Degenerate or Degendered? Images of Prostitution and Homosexuality in the French Third Republic’, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 20 (2) (1997), 205-28 (p. 220). For the study of the relationship between syphilis and the colonial construction of Indochinese gender, particularly in medico-scientific and legal discourses, see Tracol-Huynh, ‘Désir et répulsion: les prostituées du Tonkin’, and Proshan, “‘Syphilis, Opiomania, and Pederasty’”, 610-36.

³⁶ Yee, *The Colonial Comedy*, p. 200.

³⁷ *The Hero in French Decadent Literature*, p. 352.

degeneration. Conflating these two figures, the *congai-femme fatale* in colonial literature represents at once the ‘tool’ of and the ‘threat’ to the coloniser’s identity, allowing him to construct himself as the virile male coloniser, yet also making his identity problematic. René Crayssac in the poem ‘La congai’ published in 1913 epitomises the ambivalence inherent in the native *congai* when he evokes the decadent *congai-femme fatale* in all her splendour while overtly articulating her subversive political potential. Her destructive power lies in her anti-colonial vengeance against the white male colonisers’ ‘énergies’ (line 10-11).³⁸

This oppositional impulse seems to echo the contradictory views on *encongayement* within French colonial discourse at the turn of the century. The period witnessed a shift from seeing *encongayement* as a means of facilitating the coloniser’s acculturation towards the view that this cohabitation presented a threat to French imperial rule. These contesting views seem to be officially resolved in the prohibition of interracial cohabitation between French civil servants and native concubines in 1897 for Cochinchina and in 1908 for all of Indochina.³⁹

The arguments in support of this prohibition clearly focus on the threat to white prestige and the degeneration of the white race at the time of the consolidation of modern bourgeois rule: ‘Le concubinage n’est pas seulement la cause d’une chute individuelle, mais il devient la cause biologique (à cause des maladies vénériennes) et sociale de la dégénération de la race européenne dans son ensemble.’⁴⁰ *Encongayement*, which in the beginning of colonisation was condoned for the well-being of colonisers, came to signify – precisely because of the same rationale – the ‘loss of (white) self’ at both the individual and national level. Colonial literature, as we have seen, engages with the same issues but from a more

³⁸ René Creyssac, ‘La congai’, in *Sous les flamboyants*, p. 44. See Annex 3.

³⁹ Tracol-Huynh, ‘Désir et répulsion: les prostituées du Tonkin’, p. 224. According to Stoler, the first prohibition started earlier, from 1893 until 1911 (‘Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia’, in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. by Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 198-235 (p. 210)).

⁴⁰ Tracol-Huynh. See also Marie-Paule’s Ha’s ‘Présentation’ in Clotilde Chivas-Baron, *La Femme française aux colonies, suivi de Contes et légendes de l’Annam* (Paris: L’Harmattan, [1929 and 1917] 2009), p. xiii. See also, Stoler, ‘Making Empire Respectable’, 634-60 (p. 647).

ambivalent perspective. Significantly, the tropes of degeneration and *décivilisation* deployed to repudiate this interracial practice reflect the significant role of cultural Decadence in both the articulation of colonialist discourse and the actual practice of colonial rule.

Interestingly, this change in how native concubinage was seen coincided with a campaign for the emigration of French women to the colonies, marked by the foundation of the Société française d'émigration des femmes in 1897. In promotional materials aimed at initiating women into life in the empire, Indochina features as one of the few colonies suitable for French women.⁴¹ The 'mission civilisatrice au féminin' aspires to phase out male cohabitation with native concubines in order to stop the mixed-blood progeny on one hand, and, on the other hand, to reproduce 'des nouvelles Frances' and refashion the authentic 'pure race française'.⁴² However, despite all these attempts by the French State and accompanying discourses concerning moral and racial decay, *encongayement* continued to be practiced widely, as attested by Albert de Pouvourville's essays on the problems of interracial cohabitation and the *métis* published in 1913.⁴³

This historical background is crucial to the shift of the literary representation of the *congai-femme fatale* towards the apparent condemnation and stigmatisation of this figure in colonial literature. Such a stigmatised representation can be found in the short story, 'Pour un bijou' (1917) by Jeanne Leuba.⁴⁴ Leuba creates a contemptuous picture of two Annamite *congais*, 'servantes-mâîtresses' (p. 381), who live in a faraway French post in Laos with a Chinese merchant and French 'douanier'. Their portrait, characterised by wickedness, avidity and jealousy, synthesises all the novelistic and racist clichés of 'la perfide *Congai*'.

⁴¹ Marie-Paul Ha, *French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 84-118.

⁴² Marie-Paule Ha's 'Présentation' in Chivas-Baron, *La Femme française aux colonies*, p. xiv.

⁴³ Albert de Pouvourville, 'Mariages mixtes et métis I', *La Nouvelle revue*, 1 May 1913, 36-46, and 'Mariages mixtes et métis II', *La Nouvelle revue*, 15 May 1913, 155-67. Although there is no evidence of Pouvourville's visit to Indochina in the year leading up to these articles, they took up a patriotic and racialist position in view of the protection of the White race against the legalisation of interracial children born out of 'les unions libres'. These articles attest to Pouvourville's endeavour to follow current issues and voice his opinion regarding Indochina and French colonisation more generally.

⁴⁴ Jeanne Leuba, 'Pour un bijou', *Revue indochinoise*, 5-6 (1917), 381-92.

Concubinage with the native *congai* is even more problematic when a *métis(se)* is engendered as s/he embodies, not only culturally but also biologically, ‘le danger de décadence menaçant la France’.⁴⁵

The Métisse

Already during the colonial period, métissage was considered ‘a dangerous source of subversion [...] a threat to white prestige, and embodiment of European degeneration and moral decay’ because the mixed-blood child born of a union between a French parent and a parent of another race was often seen as more ‘primitive’ and inferior.⁴⁶ Gobineau’s thesis in his *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853-5) that the pure races that had existed originally were imperilled because of generalised *métissage*, feeds into this negative ‘mixophobic’ vision of the mixed-blood progeny, who were seen as both the cause and the manifestation of decadence.⁴⁷

The figure of the *métisse* as *femme fatale* cannot be said to be ubiquitous in colonial literature of Indochina between the 1880s to the 1920s, the period that is the focus of my thesis, although they appeared with increasing frequency towards the end of 1920s. This shift partly reflects pressing concerns among the French authorities regarding what was called the ‘problem métis’. Because of the number of illegitimate and abandoned children, Indochina, more than any other French colony, represented ‘un véritable laboratoire pour la question métisse’, challenging ‘from within’ Republican principles concerning the questions of citizenship and nationality.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Kim Lefèvre, ‘Èves jaunes et colons blancs’, in *Saigon, 1925-1945 de la “Belle Colonie” à l’éclosion révolutionnaire ou la fin des dieux blancs*, ed. by Philippe Franchini (Paris: Autrement, 1994), pp. 111-19 (p. 118).

⁴⁶ Stoler, ‘Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers’, p. 199. For the ideological and political use of *métissage* in the *longue durée*, see Jennifer Yee, ‘Métissage in France: A Postmodern Fantasy and its Forgotten Precedents’, *Modern & Contemporary France*, 11 (4) (2003), 411-25.

⁴⁷ This thesis was advanced particularly in *Les Selections sociales* (1896) by George Vacher de Lapouge considered ‘the most important racial thinker in France’ (George L. Moose, *Toward the Final Solution. A History of European Racism* (London, Melbourne and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons 1978), p. 58).

⁴⁸ Emmanuelle Saada, *Les Enfants de la colonie: les métis de l’Empire française entre sujétion et citoyenneté* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007), p. 15. It is difficult to assess the exact number of the mixed blood population in colonial Indochina for if they were recognised by their parent, they were considered, in official documents, French

Legal debates concerning the *métis* began taking place from the 1910s, with a peak period in the late 1920s in the tense climate of the Vietnamese nationalist movement.⁴⁹ Two *femme fatale* characters from novels written at an interval of almost two decades, *Petites épouses* (1902) and *Confidences de métisse* (1926) will be the focus of this section as they provide an illuminating vision of the complex and ever-changing ways in which French writers articulated one of the most fearful, if not nightmarish, consequences of sexual contact in the Empire.

If the *métisse* was already present as early as in Bonnetain's *L'Opium* (1884) in the character of the degenerate opium smoker, Herthol's *congai*, Loulou, as mentioned in Chapter One, it is in Véronique-Euphrosine from Myriam Harry's *Petites épouses* (1902) that the *métisse* as a *femme fatale* takes on the double characteristics of a *fin-de-siècle* New Woman and a colonial object of perverse desire.

The mistress of the debauched Morin, Véronique-Euphrosine is the most sought-after woman within 'le monde de la galanterie saigonnaise' (p. 145). She was raised in the convent for abandoned children where she was given her European name by the nuns. The allusion to Euphrosyne, one of the three graces who usually attend the goddess of love Aphrodite and her companion Eros, foregrounds her erotic nature and identifies her as both a pleasure-seeking self and a procurer of pleasure for others.⁵⁰ In an echo of Claude Farrère's cultural hybrid Anna in *Fumée d'opium*, this *métisse* deliberately plays with her twin identity:

citizens in the same manner as the French who came from the métropole or the Creoles. However, hypothetical numbers were speculated by historians using censuses, mostly undertaken in the 1930s, for French citizens living in Indochina by looking into their geographical origin, see for example Pierre Guillaume, 'Les métis en Indochine', *Annales de démographie historique*, 1 (1995), 185-95. For the *métis* who were not recognised by their parent, it is even more difficult to establish precise numbers.

⁴⁹ Stoler, 'Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers', p. 228.

⁵⁰ 'Euphrosyne' literally means 'celle qui jouit le cœur' ('Les Charites', *Mythes et mythologie. Histoire et dictionnaire*, ed. by Félix Guirand and Joël Schmidt (Paris: Larousse, 1996), pp. 174-5). This convent is mentioned on p. 33 during Alain's *congai* hunting as 'le couvent de la Sainte-Enfance'. Founded in 1860 by Mère Benjamin and the nuns of the congregation Saint-Paul de Chartres, it was known as a specialised institution for abandoned native and mixed-blood children (Saada, *Les Enfants de la colonie*, p. 84). The fact that the young 'filles indigènes et métisses mises à mal et délaissées' of this institution were the object of desire of the French male colonisers is also mentioned by Clotilde Chivas-Baron (*La Femme française aux colonies*, pp. 63-4).

‘[elle] priait tous les dimanches à l’église et toutes les nouvelles lunes à la pagode’ and ‘on l’apercevait aussi au théâtre habillée à la française, ou sur une terrasse de café, en soutane et pieds nus’ (p. 143-4). Her portrait as *femme fatale* is built out of a composite of heterogeneous aspects, all reflecting the mixed cultural and political landscape of the colony.

She is one of the abandoned half-breeds whose welfare formed the heart of the *mission civilisatrice* that preoccupied both the missionaries, subject of the ‘cause célèbre’ of the newly arrived French *coloniales* and European feminists.⁵¹ At the same time, she is a ‘New Woman’⁵² whose mobility by bike and automobile is the topic of criticism and contempt. She is a successful businesswoman whose financial gain is explained as the result of her avidity (she even invests in stocks for the railway of Cochinchina). Véronique-Euphrosine is also an *entremetteuse* who is involved in the trafficking of young native and *métis* prostitutes, both male and female, exclusively for the colonisers (p. 143-5). She thus represents the transgression that metropolitan and colonial authorities fear: the promiscuity of the abandoned *métisse*. In colonial discourse concerning the half-breeds, ‘the gender breakdown is clear: moral instruction reflected fears of sexual promiscuity in *métisse* girls and the political threat of *métis* boys turned militant men’.⁵³ According to the writer Kim Lefèvre, who also mentions the

⁵¹ The ‘Société d’assistance aux enfants métis abandonnés’ in Saigon was founded in 1894 and later became the ‘Société de protection de l’enfance de Cochinchine’ in 1906 (Saada, *Les Enfants de la colonie*, p. 33 and 84). The same period, as mentioned earlier, also witnessed the foundation of the ‘Société française d’émigration des femmes’ and the prohibition of the concubinage in the same year of 1897. All these historical facts suggest that cultural, moral and political concerns over the twin problem of *concubinage* and *métissage* started as soon as the conquest ended and the period of ‘mise en valeur’ began with the adoption of ‘la politique du prestige’.

⁵² The figure of the New Woman emerged in Europe around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at a time when new social, political and economic conditions provided liberating potential for women that changed the scope of their sense of identity and their everyday activities. Although the New Woman and the *femme fatale* are related, they cannot always be conflated, see Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr, *A ‘Belle Époque’?: Women in French Society and Culture 1890-1914* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), and Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death*, pp. viii-ix.

⁵³ Stoler, ‘Making Empire Respectable’, 634-60 (p. 648). Stoler also notes in another article that ‘anticolonial challenges in Indochina, contrary to the discourse that characterized the métis as a potential subversive vanguard, were never predominantly led or peopled by them.’ (‘Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers’, p. 200). In his article about concubinage and the *métis* children, Albert de Pourville, who is very critical about the ‘segregationist’ education of the *métis* as provided by religious, feminist and state-run institutions for abandoned mixed-bloods, expresses the same fear about the rebellious nature of the *métis* in an essentialist term because it is ‘dans leurs veines, d’un sang qui n’est pas le nôtre’ (‘Mariages mixtes et métis II’, 155-67 (p. 158)).

Sainte-Enfance convent, the figure of the *métisse congai* is the ‘deuxième génération de “petites alliées”, celles des Eurasiennes, nouvelles recrues sur le marché des femmes indigènes, les Jeanine, les Solange, issues de leurs mère “annamites”, les Thai Ba, les Thi Ngau.’⁵⁴ Ultimately, it is Véronique-Euphrosine’s lethal and contaminating power that identifies her as the *femme fatale*. She is said to be the cause of ruins and suicides among her French lovers (p. 145) and held accountable by Alain for the transformation of his *congai* into a complete *femme fatale*.

Véronique-Euphrosine’s portrait as a modern New Woman *femme fatale* suggests the imperial trajectory of how changing female identity was imagined, from the *Métropole* to the colony. But, most of all, this portrait foregrounds the *métisse*’s transgressive womanhood, which is believed to be so because of her indigenous blood. In comparison with Claude Farrère’s Anna in *Fumée d’opium* who represents the ideal ‘hybird’ colonial subject in the ‘cultural’ sense, Véronique-Euphrosine is a ‘hybrid’ being, in the ‘biological’ sense of ‘bâtard’. The *métisse* ‘embodies’, in the literal sense of the term, a deeper degree of political disruption. Her presence in itself betrays ‘la mauvaise conscience des maîtres’.⁵⁵ Moreover, an increased condemnation of *métissage* was in fact contemporaneous with the rise of nationalism during the Third Republic; ‘la pureté du sang’ that was the underpinning ideology was predicated on the belief in the superiority of the race.⁵⁶ As half-breeds were generally believed to inherit the most degenerate aspects of both races,⁵⁷ they represented those groups of people who, in Stoler’s words, ‘straddled and disrupted cleanly marked social divides and whose diverse

⁵⁴ Lefèvre, ‘Èves jaunes et colons blancs’, pp. 116-7. The ‘petites alliées’ refers to Claude Farrère’s novel of that name, published in 1910, whose subject is prostitutes and drugs, specifically opium, in Toulon where soldiers embark from and to the colonies.

⁵⁵ Pierre Brocheux, ‘Le métis dans la littérature indochinoise’, in *Réver l’Asie: exotisme et littérature coloniale aux Indes, en Indochine et en Insulinde*, ed. by Denys Lambard (Paris: Édition de l’École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1993), pp. 335-9 (p. 337). See also Jennifer Yee, ‘Neither Flesh nor Fowl: “Métissage” in Fin-de-Siècle French Colonial Fiction’, *L’Esprit Créateur*, 38 (1998), 46-56 (p. 54).

⁵⁶ Pierre-André Taguieff, ‘Doctrines de la race et hantise du métissage: fragments d’une histoire de la mixophobie savante’, *Nouvelle revue d’ethnopsychiatrie*, 17 (1991), 53-100 (p. 54).

⁵⁷ Tracol-Huynh, and Abenap A. Busia, ‘Miscegenation as Metonymy: Sexuality and Power in the Colonial Novel’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 9 (1986), 360-72 (p. 367).

membership exposed the arbitrary logic by which the categories of control were made'.⁵⁸ Combining sexual, cultural and political subversiveness, Harry's *métisse femme fatale* thus represents the site where *fin-de-siècle* metropolitan and colonial preoccupations intertwine.

The characterisation of the *métisse femme fatale* underwent a shift in the late 1920s when biologically determined racialist discourse gave way to an emphasis on the psycho-sociological aspect of *métissage*, seen then as a social phenomenon of the colony. Clotilde Chivas-Baron, one of the most renowned female authors of colonial Indochina, explores the tragic life of an abandoned *métisse* in her 1926 novel *Confidences de métisse*, winner of the Grand Prix de la Littérature coloniale and dedicated to Claude Farrère.⁵⁹

Abandoned by her French father, the *métisse* Jeanine grows up with hatred and bitterness and is determined to seek vengeance on him. She becomes the mistress of his father's business partner in Indochina before leaving for France where she becomes a 'danseuse annamite' while trying to take her revenge on his French family. Suffering from tuberculosis, she takes a boat bound for Indochina. On board, she finally meets her father, and seduces him before revealing her identity. This revelation leads him to tip over and fall out, or jump out, of the boat. This however leaves her bitter; she commits suicide with ether in her cabin.

Adopting the point of view of the native, already explored in her *Trois femmes Annamites* (1922) which won the Prix Jouy of the Académie Française, Chivas-Baron's novel

⁵⁸ 'Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers', p. 225.

⁵⁹ Clotilde Chivas-Baron, *Confidences de métisse* (Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle, [1926] 1927). The 'Grand Prix de la littérature coloniale' was founded by the 'Ministère des colonies' in 1921 and reflects one of many attempts to institutionalise the supposedly anti-exotic 'littérature coloniale'. See Kapor, *Le Grand prix de littérature coloniale, 1921-1938: lauréats, jugements, controverse*. The reference to Claude Farrère is made explicit in the text by the expression 'O petites Alliées' (p. 128) to describe the circle of *métisses-congais*-prostitutes of Saigon with whom the female protagonist socialises. In her article 'Èves jaunes et colons blancs', Kim Lefèvre, the postcolonial female writer, seems to be extensively influenced by Chivas-Baron's protagonist in her depiction of the experience of the *métisse congais* as being bitter and revengeful, particularly *vis-à-vis* the French colonial community (p. 117). She also quotes Chivas-Baron's novel directly (p. 116 and 118). Colonial literature thus partly informs and serves as the template in the articulation of the post-colonial writer's colonial experience. Hence, the caption under the title of Lefèvre's article, which may be written by the author herself or, more plausibly, by the editor, presents this article as a testimonial writing by 'Kim Lefèvre, Eurasienne, témoigne ici de son expérience vécue à l'intérieur du métissage' (p. 111).

offers an early articulation of the native feminine subjectivity. It is even more significant that this articulation was penned by a French female author. On one level, this narrative technique can be read as a political and aesthetic response to metropolitan and colonial misogynist representations of the native woman's dangerous sexuality. Such misogyny is found in the works of both male and female authors.⁶⁰ On another level, the exploration of the *métisse's* subjectivity echoes and takes part in the emerging, although ephemeral, pseudo-scientific discipline of the 'psychologie coloniale' during the interwar period.⁶¹ Yet, this attempt does not of course exclude many occurrences of racist stereotypes, particularly directed towards the native *congai*.

However, this psycho-sociological emphasis which seems to promote 'la reconnaissance et la représentation de l'altérité'⁶² needs to be understood in the specific context of the *mission civilisatrice au féminin* and Chivas-Baron's 'feminist' activist background. Indeed, Chivas-Baron was better known in the *métropole* as the 'promotrice de l'émigration des femmes' in the Empire. She also participated in many organisations promoting women's rights, including native women's rights.⁶³ She wrote a manual-cum-essay, *La Femme française aux colonies* (1929), illustrating the role and influence of women in the Empire from the

⁶⁰ Myriam Harry and Jeanne Leuba are other female authors who portray, albeit sometimes with ambiguity, native women according to misogynistic as well as racist clichés. See Eugène Pujarnisclé's criticism of Leuba in *Philoxène ou la littérature coloniale en France*, pp. 97-99, and 102.

⁶¹ The colonial administrator George Hardy (1884-1972), who occupied many important high level posts, notably that of the director of the École coloniale from 1926 to 1932, was the forerunner of this discipline, which he included in the curriculum of the students, the future colonial administrators of the École coloniale in the late 1920s. Chivas-Baron was also an admirer of Hardy whom she quoted in *La Femme française aux colonies* (p. 5). Oscillating between scientific and literary discourses – colonial literature paradoxically being its main 'scientific' source –, the 'psychologie coloniale' aims to construct a psychological discourse concerning the colonised's societies in the service of the 'politique de l'association'. Partly influenced by the Africanist Maurice Delafosse's cultural relativism, this discipline, at least in its principal, 'refuse l'explication par la race et actualise la conception de "races psychologiques" élaborée par Le Bon. Ainsi, on substitue l'âme à la race.' (Pierre Singaravélou, 'De la psychologie coloniale à la géographie psychologique: itinéraire, entre science et littérature, d'une discipline éphémère dans l'entre-deux-guerres', *L'Homme et la société*, 167-169 (2008/1), 119-48 (p. 134)). Thus, an emphasis is placed on the 'milieu' and physical environment, and not on physiology as in experimental psychology (p. 135).

⁶² Copin, *L'Indochine dans la littérature française* p. 176.

⁶³ Marie-Paule Ha, 'Introduction', in Chivas-Baron, *La Femme française aux colonies*, pp. viii-x.

‘ancien régime’ to the twentieth century, while giving practical and moral guidelines for future *coloniales* on how to keep a colonial household and conduct oneself in colonial societies.⁶⁴

As such, the narration and the reversal in point of view deployed in this novel serve to denounce *concupinage*, particularly condemning French men who engaged in this sexual contact and their paternal irresponsibility, while providing an explanation, seemingly without stigmatisation, for the mixed-blood’s resentment and desire for vengeance. However, by suggesting the predestination of the *métisse* for prostitution, Chivas-Baron reproduces the dominant mixophobic French view of *métissage*. This view in fact formed the ideological basis for the charitable, educational and moral projects of the ‘coloniale moderne’ as advanced and embodied by the writer herself. In the vanguard of the bourgeois moral order, active agent in empire-building, and protector of French prestige, the *coloniale* of the bourgeois empire takes on ‘le double fardeau de la femme blanche’ with its inherent paradoxes.⁶⁵

In other words, the narrative strategy of the reversed point of view is informed by the *coloniale*’s moral duty – the ‘conquête du cœur au féminin’ – towards the abandoned mixed-bloods on one hand, and, on the other, her intellectual engagement in ethno-psychological studies of the native character and societies.⁶⁶ Yet, at the same time, Jeanine’s destined tragic end is dictated by the ‘paradox’ of the devoted feminist *coloniale*, whose chief duty is to uplift the ‘white’ empire by keeping racial mixtures at bay and to oversee the

⁶⁴ Writings of a similar nature are to be found in other Empires. See for example, the case of the British *memsahibs* in colonial Uganda in Beverley Gartrell, ‘Colonial Wives: Villains or Victims?’, in *The Incorporated Wife*, ed. by Shirley Ardener and Hilary Callan (London: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 165-85.

⁶⁵ Ha, ‘Introduction’, in Chivas-Baron, *La Femme française aux colonies*, p. xxv. Indeed, two contesting figures of the *coloniale* existed at the turn of the century: the destructive and the regenerative female settlers. The former is epitomised in ‘the myth of the destructive female’, according to which white women were the chief culprits in the demise of the empire. They were said to instil ‘indigénophonie’ into the white colonial community in domesticating the colony according to the metropolitan model. The *décivilisé* Philoxène, one of Eugène Pujarsnicle’s pseudo-fictive characters exemplifies this view in *Philoxène ou la littérature coloniale en France*, p. 133. In contrast, the regenerative *coloniale* promoted particularly by the *Société française d’émigration des femmes* (SFEF) imposed a new discourse of imperial womanhood as ‘builders of “new Frances”’ where “authentic” French values and practices would be created’ (Ha, *French Women and the Empire*, pp. 15-17). See also Marie-Paule Ha, ‘Engendering French Colonial History: The Case of Indochina’, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 25 (1999), 95-125.

⁶⁶ *La Femme française aux colonies*, p. 88. Chivas-Baron is also the author of *Contes et légendes de l’Annam* (1917), laureate of the Prix Montyon of the Académie française.

Frenchification of the empire. In this light, *Confidences de métisse*, which was published only two years before the first law concerning the *métis* was promulgated in 1928, can be read as a patriotic warning in favour of the re-alignment of the political project of the bourgeois French empire in the wake of the First World War, when nationalist demands were being formulated insistently.⁶⁷

Hence, in contrast to Myriam Harry's *métisse femme fatale*, there seems to be a movement away from disturbing decadent aesthetics towards a more 'colonialist' tonality characteristic of the 'official' colonial literature focusing on the ideal of 'truth' or a faithful, realist representation of colonial society. The *métisse*-prostitute that replaced the *métisse femme fatale* is 'fatal' in a new sense of self-destructive. Interestingly enough, the end of the 1920s also witnessed the advent of the male *métis* in colonial fiction.⁶⁸

In fact, in the history of ideas, *métissage* has not always been categorically condemned. The 'mixophobic model' was developed mainly within the realms of the life sciences over the nineteenth century, but it became more dominant and widespread in scientific and popular discourses by the end of the nineteenth century.⁶⁹ In colonial Indochina, Paul Bonnetain was among the first to propose a potential recuperation of the half-breed progeny in his journalistic writings as early as 1884. Three years later, he reasserts this somewhat 'mixophilic' view by contrasting the conspicuous beauty of the Franco-Indochinese mixed-bloods with the appearance of the Indochinese: 'Les unions franco-annamites ont donné et

⁶⁷ Even though the 1928 law gave French citizenship to mixed-blood children if they could prove they had not only a French parent but also the possession of French cultural and social attributes, in practice, the process of legalisation remained unclear and complicated. In Jeanine's case, the French *colon*, Achille Balisier concludes a pact with her biological father. In exchange for financial compensation, he takes her mother as his *congaï* and fraudulently recognises Jeanine as his daughter. Jeanine's case thus reflects the fear of the colonial administration concerning fraudulent paternity on one hand, and on the other hand, the haunting terror of racial mixing as threatening the order of nature, and thus the order of the Empire. For it is not Jeanine's legal status that is the cause of her tragic destiny (as she is given her French nationality and citizenship), it is her biological hybridity that creates 'un stigmaté' resulting in her vicious and fatal nature (Brocheux, 'Le métis dans la littérature indochinoise', p. 336). The mixed-blood child will always be alienated not only by both societies, but also from his/her own self.

⁶⁸ For example, Jehan Cendrieux, *François Phuoc métis. Roman indochinois* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1929). For a study of mixed-bloods in the colonial literature of Indochina from the middle of the 1920s onwards, see Copin, *L'Indochine des romans*, pp. 92-130.

⁶⁹ Yee, 'Métissage in France', 411-25.

donnent toujours d'assez jolis produits au nez un peu camus, aux yeux droits, au poil châtain, au teint éclairci. — On ne nous ôtera pas de l'idée, à ce propos, que les jolies congais qu'on nous fit voir à Saïgon avaient un peu de sang français dans les veines!⁷⁰ In Bonnetain's view, the myth of 'la belle *métisse*' has its place within the regenerative framework of the French race.⁷¹

His apparent 'mixophilic' attitude needs to be understood within the context of depopulation in France and France's rivalry with the British Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. As opposed to England and Germany, *fin-de-siècle* France experienced a worrying decrease in birth rates, resulting in anxiety concerning the future of the French nation.⁷² Thus, Bonnetain's optimistic view of *métissage* offers 'a solution to the French problem of birth rates in the form of a spermatic investment in the colonies'.⁷³ However, Bonnetain's practical solution remains marginal *vis-à-vis* the dominant mixophobic discourse as attested by the fixist and essentialist view in the articulation of the figure of the *métisse* as the decadent *femme fatale* in *fin-de-siècle* colonial literature of Indochina.

* * * * *

If the *femme fatale* is 'la femme-fatale-à-l'homme', her excessive and transgressive sexuality says as much about the ways in which the male coloniser's masculinity was imagined and constructed. As suggested throughout my close reading, the coloniser seems caught between the idea of virile coloniser and that of the sterile emasculated decadent man. This dual identity is constructed not only in relation to the native woman, but often even more in opposition to, or through contamination with, the effeminate native men. We shall now move on to

⁷⁰ Paul Bonnetain, *Le Monde pittoresque et monumental. L'Extrême-Orient* (Paris: Quantin, 1887), p. 136.

⁷¹ For a study of the evolving argument of regeneration through miscegenation based on the Buffonian concept of species during the nineteenth century, see Claude Blanckaert, 'Of Monstrous Métis? Hybridity, Fear of Miscegenation, and Patriotism from Buffon to Paul Broca', in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, ed. by Sue Peabody and Tyler Edward Stovall (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) pp. 44-48).

⁷² Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour*, pp. 72-97.

⁷³ Yee, 'Métissage in France', 411-25 (p. 419).

examine the decadent figures of the androgyne and the homosexual as they appear on both sides of the racial divide.

THE ANDROGYNE AND THE HOMOSEXUAL FROM ORIENTAL MYSTICISM TO COLONIAL SATIRE

Orientalist-colonialist discourse, which has been shown by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to be primarily predicated on heterosexual desire, casts the colonial regions as feminine and sees Oriental men as effeminate to prepare for Western 'penetration'. Following Said, postcolonial scholarship has shown the complex ways in which, by gendering racial difference this way, colonial discourse also actively participates in the construction of masculinity (and its denigrated relation, homosexuality), both colonial *and* metropolitan, through the trope of colonial effeminacy.⁷⁴

Seen particularly at the *fin de siècle* as both a symptom and cause of racial degeneracy and civilisational decadence, the type, or stereotype, of the 'effeminate colonised' is constructed in terms of biologically and racially fixed boundaries, so that the demarcation of manhood beyond those boundaries is simultaneously racialised. However, while the image of the degenerate race seems to be systematically identified with the colonised in wider

⁷⁴ Critical works on male effeminacy and colonialism have focused particularly on the British Empire, including notably Philippa Levine, *Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 6-7, Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), and Sara Suleri Goodyear, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Using colonial discourse analysis together with queer theory, an increasing number of scholars have extensively contributed to a focus on male homoeroticism and homosexuality in relation to colonialism. See the aforementioned Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism, Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature*, ed. by Philip Holden and Richard R. Ruppel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), Robert F. Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 2003), Rudi Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behaviour Outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750-1918* (London: Cassell, 1996), and Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1995). Specifically for the French Empire, works have only been undertaken recently and have mostly focused on the post-colonial period or on the colonial period but with the focus on the Maghreb, the French Caribbean and the Middle East. On the contrary, less attention has been paid to Sub-Saharan Africa and Indochina. See *Entre Hommes: French and Francophone Masculinities in Culture and Theory*, ed. by Todd W. Reeser and Lewis Carl Seifert (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), Robert Aldrich, 'Homosexuality in the French Colonies', *Journal of homosexuality*, 41 (2002), 201-18, Edward J. Hughes, *Writing Marginality in Modern French Literature: From Loti to Genet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 'Cambridge studies in French', 2001), and Michael Lucey, *Gide's Bent: Sexuality, Politics, Writing* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

colonial discourse across different empires, a more complex view appears in the French empire. With a rise in the emerging formation of ‘colonial psychology’, combined with a perceived crisis of masculinity that was felt to affect France more than other European countries at the *fin de siècle*,⁷⁵ the *colons* themselves were also considered to form ‘a distinct and degenerate social type, with specific psychological and even physical characteristics.’⁷⁶

Nowhere is this *topos* of colonial effeminacy explored in a more complex and nuanced manner than in the colonial literature of Indochina at the turn of the century. In this body of writing, male effeminacy afflicts both the colonised *and* coloniser in ways that destabilise the supposedly fixed racial and sexual frontiers underpinning colonial rule.

This colonial *topos* picks up and feeds into the wider decadent theme of sexual ambiguity in vogue in *fin-de-siècle* French and European literature, reflected by writers such as Joséphin Péladan, Rachilde, Jean Lorrain, and Oscar Wilde. As in metropolitan decadent literature, the treatment of decadent male effeminacy and sexual perversion in the colonial literature of Indochina can be seen as an engagement with French sexual politics. Yet, confrontation with perceived polyamorous sexuality, particularly male homoeroticism, in the colonial context unsettles Western norms of masculinity even further, thus leading to the constant redefinitions of the male coloniser’s subjectivity.

I will focus on two distinct, albeit overlapping, figures: the androgyne and the homosexual from *L’Annam sanglant* (1890) by Pouvoirville and *Les Civilisés* (1904) by Claude Farrère. I propose to situate the colonial effeminate characters in relation to what is now well recognised as the ‘French crisis of masculinity’.⁷⁷ The terms in which the *topos* of male

⁷⁵ Nye, ‘Degeneration and the Medical Model of Cultural Crisis’, p. 24.

⁷⁶ Stoler, ‘Making Empire Respectable’, 634-60 (p. 646).

⁷⁷ Studies on French modern manhood abound particularly in cultural and medical history. For the so-called crisis of masculinity see particularly Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness & Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), Corbin, Courtine, and Virello, *Histoire de la virilité*, Christopher E. Forth, ‘Neurasthenia and Manhood in Fin-de-Siècle France’, *Cultures of Neurasthenia*, 63 (2001), 329-61, George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour*, and his ‘Degeneration and the Medical Model of Cultural Crisis’, and Annelise Mauge, *L’Identité masculine en crise au tournant du siècle 1871-1914* (Paris: Rivages, 1987).

effeminacy is cast in these texts will be explored as a response to this anxiety over manhood and its links to the self-image and future of the French nation and its empire. This is a project that the colonial literature of Indochina seems to undertake with various, and at times contradictory, modulations, from the appropriation of Oriental mysticism (Pouvourville) to the satire of decadent aesthetics itself (Farrère). Unexpected, even creative, models of masculinity emerge not only as a historical and aesthetic conception, but as an integral, yet potentially oppositional, component of colonial discourse.

The French Imperialist Gaze: From the Hermaphrodite to the Decadent Male Androgyne

The relatively few critics who have studied the theme of male effeminacy in the colonial literature of Indochina seem to agree that although Indochina cannot be said to have a monopoly on the theme of male effeminacy, when compared with French literature set in other colonies, it carries a specific association with physical androgyny.⁷⁸ Freshly arrived French travellers in the first decades of the French conquest and colonial administration were generally struck by what they experienced as the gender confusion of Indochinese men and women.⁷⁹ Apparently ‘unisexual’ sartorial codes and hairstyles, alongside male beardlessness, were seen as signifying a ‘sexual isomorphism’ symptomatic of the degenerate Indochinese race. This was particularly so in comparison with nineteenth-century European attire where ‘sexual dimorphism’, and the heteronormative order of things and sexual morality along with it, was displayed as the primary marker of advanced civilisation.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Frank Proschan, ‘Eunuch Mandarins, Soldats Mamzelles, Effeminate Boys and Graceless Women: French Colonial Constructions of Vietnamese Genders’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 8 (2002), 435-67, “Syphilis, Opiomania, and Pederasty”, 610-36, and Yee, “Indochine androgyne”, 269-82.

⁷⁹ Alain Ruscio, “Nous avons débarqué au milieu du peuple le plus étrange”, in *La Colonisation des corps de l’Indochine au Vietnam*, ed. by François Guillemot and Agathe Larcher-Goscha (Paris: Vendémiaire, 2014), pp. 61-81.

⁸⁰ Indochinese women and men wore the same long tunic and both had long hair which they tied and wrapped under a turban. For a discussion of sexual dimorphism and its implications in the construction of nineteenth-century manhood and womanhood, see Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour*, pp. 87-90. Beardlessness was considered as ‘un signe suspect de non-virilité, et donc de potentielle homosexualité’ (Régis Revenin, ‘Homosexualité et virilité’, in Corbin, Courtine, and Virello, *Histoire de la virilité*, p. 398).

In Bonnetain's novel, *L'Opium* (1886), Marcel Deschamps, freshly arrived in Tonkin, is taken ashore by two native rowers. In this first encounter with the native, he is struck by their hermaphroditic appearance (p. 151). His first impression of these indigenous bodies is characterised by ambivalence, including both 'répugnances' for their ugliness and admiration for their elegant, almost pictorial, refinement. The perceived sexual ambiguity of the two natives comes to signify that of the entire 'race insexuelle' (p. 154).

Bonnetain's use of the word 'insexualité' emphasises physical *indifférenciation* rather than lack of sexual desire, as attested by the recognisable sensuality of their bodies.⁸¹ What can be deduced from this brief encounter is the 'imperialist gaze' that hyper-sexualises the native body in decadent terms. These 'deux croupes jumelles' thus represent 'les troublants mystères d'une enfantine civilisation perversement décadente' (p. 152). This decadent gaze is fundamentally 'masculine', regardless of the sex of the author.⁸² In addition, in tune with the Decadent obsession with medical pathology, Marcel's depiction of Indochinese isomorphism is representative of the social-Darwinist racialist view that sees this, in contrast to the more civilisationally and biologically advanced dimorphism, as the sign of the native's hereditary inferiority and 'hence of their aptness for colonial subjugation'.⁸³

The decadent treatment of sexual ambiguity as deployed here was recuperated by later writers with a particular emphasis on the 'androgyné décadent'. This corresponds to the aesthetic move in wider *fin-de-siècle* literature from the traditional physiologically-defined-bisexual hermaphrodite of the Romantic period towards the hypersexualised effeminate male

⁸¹ *Trésor de la langue française. Dictionnaire de la langue du XIXe et du XXe siècle (1789-1960)* gives two definitions of the noun 'insexualité' as 'caractère de l'être qui paraît sexuellement indifférencié' and 'qui n'éprouve ou n'éveille aucun désir sexuel' ((Paris: Éditions du centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1983) vol. x, p. 294).

⁸² I use the terms 'male' and 'female' to refer to the biologically determined sex while the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' refer to 'culturally determined gender characteristics and qualities that are not necessarily possessed by men or women exclusively' (Diane Long Hoeveler, *Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), p. xv).

⁸³ Proschan, 'Eunuch Mandarins', 435-67 (p. 443). Robert Nye argues that the rationale according to which 'complex organisms (and societies) [are made] superior *by nature* to simpler forms [...] was taken up generally by evolutionary theorists in the late nineteenth century, whether of the Darwinian or neo-Lamarckian variety, where it often served as the scientific underpinning for social Darwinist, colonialist, and nationalist ideologies' (*Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour*, p. 87).

who combines beauty and depravity in decadent literature, though here with a defining colonial twist.⁸⁴

L'Annam sanglant: An Alternative Model of Modern Masculinity

Born into an aristocratic family with a strong military history in Nancy, Count (then Marquis) Albert-Eugène de Pouvoirville (1861-1939) (Figure 8) was a military officer, Orientalist, esotericist, colonial writer and theorist, an important promoter of French colonialism as well as a lifelong opium smoker. After finishing his secondary education in Nancy where he had as classmates the esotericist Stanislas Guaita and the future novelists Maurice Barrès and Paul Adam,⁸⁵ he entered the prestigious military school Saint-Cyr in 1880. He resigned from the army in 1887. Jean-Pierre Laurant in his biography of Pouvoirville highlights the young officer's rebellious character which made him unsuitable for military discipline.⁸⁶

Pouvoirville then enrolled as a simple soldier in the Légion Étrangère, a radical step that broke with his family's aristocratic military background. He embarked for Tonkin to participate in the French conquest in 1887-88 from which point his military career continued to advance. During this period marked by travels back-and-forth between Tonkin and France, he learnt Vietnamese, a little Chinese and, apparently, Northern Laotian.⁸⁷ In the

⁸⁴ During the Renaissance and later in Romanticism, the hermaphrodite was seen as 'a creature combining the genitalia or sexual characteristics of two bodies' (Marian Rothstein, *The Androgyne in Early Modern France: Contextualizing the Power of Gender* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 1-2). For studies of the figure of the androgyne in its historical evolution, see Frédéric Monneyron, *L'Androgyne décadent: mythes, figure, fantasmes* (Grenoble: Ellug, 1996), and *L'Androgyne romantique: du mythe au mythe littéraire* (Grenoble: Ellug, 1994). In *fin-de-siècle* Indochina, although there exists two contradictory types of Indochinese male, the 'desexualised' and 'hypersexualised (hypervirile, licentious, and eroticized, both heterosexually and homosexually', it is the latter form of male sexuality that has a profound appeal in colonial literature (Proschan, 'Eunuch Mandarins', 435-67 (p. 438)). The same can also be said for Indochinese women. They are seen either as ugly and virile or hypersexualised, but it is the hypersexualised woman embodied in the *femme fatale* type who has a deeper resonance in literary discourse.

⁸⁵ Pouvoirville later dedicated the poems 'La forêt' to Madame Adam and a poem inspired by Oriental spirituality, 'Ly Dong Than', to Barrès (*Rimes d'Asie* (Paris: E. Figuière, 1912), pp. 55-56 and 63). He wrote an essay in honour of Guaita: *Stanislas de Guaita* (Paris: Librairie hermétique, 1909).

⁸⁶ Jean-Pierre Laurant, *Matgioi: un aventurier taoïste* (Paris: Dervy Livres, 1982), pp. 28-29.

⁸⁷ Pouvoirville's biography in Marie-France James, *Ésotérisme, occultisme, franc-maçonnerie et Christianisme aux XIXe et XXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions Lanore, 2008), pp. 219-22, and the entry 'Pouvoirville' in *Dictionnaire national des contemporains*, 6 vols (Paris: Office général d'édition de librairie et d'imprimerie, 1899-1919), vol. 5, pp. 287-8.

Tonkinese Delta, his path also crossed with those of Paul Bonnetain and Jules Boissière and other French writers, many of whom would become part of the future 'Français d'Asie' literary circle.⁸⁸ After his definitive resignation from the army in 1892, which was accompanied by suspicious circumstances, he made use of his knowledge of the *Extrême-Orient* in various public missions and activities relating to French colonialism, with aims ranging from the socio-political and artistic to the religious and philosophical.⁸⁹ Polyglot and polyvalent, he was recognised during his lifetime as a prominent figure in many disciplines, particularly as an Orientalist specialising in Indochina and as an expert in Oriental spirituality who introduced Taoism and 'Extrême-Oriental' esotericism to France.⁹⁰ He signed most of his writings with his Taoist name 'Matgioi' (or sometimes 'Mat Gioi').⁹¹

However, it was undoubtedly for his novels and poetry, marked by their appropriation of Oriental spirituality that Pouvoirville was 'officially' celebrated as a colonial writer of Indochina by his contemporaries. Perhaps one of his most celebrated literary works, the novel *L'Annam sanglant* seems to have been first published under the name *De l'autre côté du mur, récits chinoise des guerres de 1883*.⁹² The first edition under its definitive title dates from 1898 and was published by the editor Louis Chamuel and illustrated by Cézard.

See also Xavier Legrand-Ferronnière's 'Postface' in Albert de Pouvoirville, *L'Annam sanglant* (Paris: Kailash, [1898] 1995), pp. 219-22.

⁸⁸ This point will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

⁸⁹ Prior to this resignation, there seems to be unanimous hostility towards him in the colonial military and civilian administrations concerning his relations with 'un individu peu recommandable'. This dubious relationship may be the source of the novel *Louis Gabriel, Pirate* published in 1932 (*Matgioi: un aventurier taoïste*, p. 32).

⁹⁰ His 'esotericist' writings and translations (he translated the works of Lao-Tseu into French) have been the topic of scholarly as well as popular studies in occultism up to today. For example one of the latest works on Pouvoirville's occultism is by José Noguiera, *Le Tao selon Matgioi ou comment gouverner votre vie?* (Paris: MdV, 2011).

⁹¹ 'Matgioi' means 'l'œil du jour', referring to the sun considered the eye of the sky. It is the opposite of Matgiang, the moon (Theophane [Léon Champenau], *Matgioi et son rôle dans les sociétés secrètes chinoises. Étude suivie d'un résumé de la métaphysique Taoïste* (Paris: Librairie Hermétique, 1910), p. 6 and 21). This corresponds to the Vietnamese word for the sun, 'mặt trời'. 'Mogd' was another pseudonym he used. At the turn of the century, he was also initiated into the gnostic tradition as 'évêque gnostique' under the name 'Simon'. However, to my knowledge, he did not publish anything under these two names.

⁹² The Bibliothèque nationale de France owns a copy of the 1897 edition published by le Courrier d'Haiphong with beautiful Chinese lithography in red ink etched on to the French text. One can read a commentary note from the librarian: 'Curiosité typographique rarissime.' It is likely that this 1897 edition was the first publication despite the information given in an article in *La Revue indochinoise* (new series, 29 (1 January 1918), p. 193) which claims that the first limited edition was published in 1890 followed by a series of republications in 1894, 1896 and 1898-(although no mention is made of the 1897 copy). This claim remains unverified since no scholar

From the Native Point of View: An Ambivalent Counter-Narrative

As the original title suggests, the story of the 1883 battles in Hanoi which were part of wider historical hostilities between France and China known as the Sino-French war (1883-5) is narrated from the other side, namely from the point of view of the indigenous resistance led by the Chinese ‘pirate’ general.⁹³ Pouvourville’s narrative focuses on the noble character and military prowess of Luu-Vinh-Phuoc (1837-1917) or, in Chinese, Liu Yongfu, (Figure 9), known by the Annamites as Ong-Luu (‘le seigneur Luu’). Supported by the Emperor of China, Ong-Luu, commander of the *Pavillons noirs* army has a mission to help the Annamite soldiers secure Son Tay against the French who occupy Hanoi.⁹⁴

The historical range covered in the novel thus includes the fight in Hanoi led by the French commander Henri Rivière who, defeated, lost his life at the *Pont de Papier* on May 19th, 1883; the battles of Phong and Phu Hoai in August and September during which the Red River floods helped the Annamites and Chinese; then the arrival of French reinforcements led by Admiral Courbet and his naval division; and finally the ultimate assault on Son-Tay on December 14th-16th, 1883.⁹⁵ Ong-Luu had also fought against and defeated Francis Garnier, who was killed during the battle at the Hanoi citadel in 1873, surprisingly in the same manner and by the same error later committed by Henri Rivière.

Almost two decades before Victor Segalen’s much celebrated *Les Immémoriaux* (1907), Pouvourville’s *L’Annam sanglant*, along with Jules Boissière’s *Fumeurs d’opium* (1896), inaugurated a new direction in the emerging French colonial literature of Indochina which

discussing the novel has found any surviving copies of the previous editions before 1897. This chronology, put together retrospectively in the 1910s by an Indochinese journal, during a time when the project of the *Français d’Asie* was at the heart of intellectual life in Indochina, can be read as an attempt to reclaim a genealogy of Franco-Indochinese literature that can be traced all the way back to the beginning of the French rule, with Pouvourville as the main instigator.

⁹³ For a discussion of the term ‘pirate’, see Chapter One. At the end of the war, the treaty of Tien T’sin was signed and China recognised French protection over Annam and Tonkin.

⁹⁴ Son Tay is a provincial town along the Red River 35 km west of Hanoi. This is probably the same battle which Claude Farrère’s former ‘légionnaire’ refers to in ‘Hors du silence’ studied in Chapter One.

⁹⁵ These events became the pretext for Jules Ferry to intervene militarily in Tonkin, marking the beginning of the official French colonial conquest. Annam and Tonkin, under the rule of the Emperor of Annam, had long been a tributary of China.

challenges the strictly monolithic view of colonial literature as being primarily colonialist and informed by a seemingly universal and irreversible paradigm of the conquering West and the conquered East. The narrative strategy of adopting the point of view of the anti-colonial resistance was unusual for the period, particularly when compared with writings set in other locations under French influence and in the context of heroic narratives of the French conquest of new colonies.

The intense two-day Son Tay battle, though far from being decisive, caused a great sensation both in China and in France ‘où l’on célébra avec emphase cette victoire, la première depuis la défaite de 1870’.⁹⁶ It received positive coverage in the French and European press,⁹⁷ while in China, according to the historian Charles Fourniau, the facts were twisted so that it was presented as a victory over the French. Within this celebratory context, Pouvoirville’s sympathetic view of native resistance stands out as an apparent criticism of French colonisation and a challenge of colonial historiography. Pouvoirville’s early involvement in the army makes this narrative strategy all the more political in its implications.⁹⁸

Along with the rewriting of some key historical events from the point of view of the Chinese general (particularly Henri Rivière’s death and the ultimate French victory at Son Tay which will be discussed later), the violent depiction of the battles as the ‘meurtre universel’ (p. 197) committed by both sides, and the emphasis on the Chinese soldiers’

⁹⁶ Fourniau, *Vietnam. Domination coloniale et résistance nationale*, p. 333.

⁹⁷ This Pan-European eagerness is linked to contemporary geopolitical shifts in relations between Europe and the Far East and a rising fear of China and Japan.

⁹⁸ Indeed, after his Tonkin campaign, Pouvoirville was back in France for a ‘congé’ in 1890 during which he was preparing a book, *Le Tonkin actuel 1887-1890* (1891), signed under his pseudonym Mat-Gioi, violently criticising French colonial politics. His father was worried for the career of the young soldier and recommended him not to reveal his identity for Pouvoirville must have published without the authorisation of the army. Pierre Loti’s case is a telling example of how colonial propaganda sought control over counter-narratives of these events at a time when the French venture in Tonkin was far from secure. Loti witnessed the French attack on the port of Thuan An near Hue, the capital of Annam, in August 1883. This attack was part of the early French campaign in Tonkin, between Henri Rivière’s death and Admiral Courbet’s siege of Son Tay. After publishing his account in *Le Figaro* of October 17th 1883, which depicted the violence of the French intervention, he was recalled to France.

humanity and courage taken together present *L'Annam sanglant* as a colonial counter-narrative.

Their ultimate massacre by the French at the end presented heroically as 'la mort heureuse' (p. 212) contrasts with the celebrated French victory and leaves the long-term viability of the French conquest in doubt. Ong-Luu's last words are thus to be read as a prediction of subsequent events: 'Souviens-toi toujours, car, dans la ruine des espoirs et des empires, le peuple, sauvé par sa haine, ne disparaîtra point' (p. 211). Indeed, the war against the 'pirates' and the 'pacification de Tonkin' was to last for decades due to enduring Vietnamese nationalist movements. This comment can also be read as a commentary on a possible regeneration from the decadence of empires. Ong-Luu's prediction concerning the future vitality of 'le peuple' who rises from the ruins of the empire goes against colonial discourse which employs the image of the ruin of ancient Asian civilisation as a metaphor for the irreversible degeneration of the native.

However, this counter-narrative stance does not exclude ambiguity pertaining in its alignment with colonial ideology. One compelling instance is the choice of protagonist. In contrast to contemporary denigrations of the Chinese pirate, Pouvourville deliberately chooses the Chinese leader over the Annamite prince Hoang-Ké-Viem (although the two were allies and the latter was appointed by the Emperor of Annam to build a Vietnamese resistance force in Tonkin). Pouvourville's sympathetic attitude towards the 'indigenous' people needs to be understood in the context of his affiliation with Far Eastern spirituality and metaphysics, particularly with Chinese Taoism, although it was in Indochina, not China, that his life-long spiritual renewal and apprenticeship took place. Thus, from his outlook, within this specific triangular conflict, China seems to be France's equal, while Annam and Tonkin represent the servile race to be 'colonised'.⁹⁹ Hence, the political disruptiveness of

⁹⁹ This can be observed in numerous depreciative comments on the Annamites in the novel which imply their servility, see for example p. 74, 88 and 128. The characterisation of the prince Hoang-Ké-Viem as a decadent

the narrative strategy seems to be undermined, or rather compensated for, by this valorisation of Chinese culture over that of the colonised *per se*.

Pouvourville's narrative is ultimately symptomatic of the racialist doctrines of his time and the degeneracy theory applied to the colonised, although his worldview is more open to cross-cultural exchange in ways that challenge a Eurocentric paradigm of civilisations.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, what is profoundly subversive in *L'Annam sanglant* is in fact its approach to gender. A decadent treatment of gender is directly related to the novel's retelling of a cross-cultural military encounter. The heroic aspect of the resistance is thus framed through the decadent *topos* of colonial effeminacy built on an unusual intertwining of homoeroticism, sexual pathology, Asian esotericism as well as metropolitan bourgeois codes of honour.

My contention is that while taking up the decadent project of sexual ambiguity, Pouvourville articulates the trope of colonial effeminacy in an unexpected way that moves his initial decadent project beyond an aestheticised perversion that is merely complicit with colonialism. *L'Annam sanglant* thus proposes a radical gender counter-narrative that valorises 'colonial androgyny' as an alternative model of modern masculinity, in response to the perceived national crisis of manhood.

Latent and Overt Homoeroticism: Two Overlapping Pathological Visions of Indochina

Critics have generally agreed on a certain continuity between the Romantic revival of the androgyny theme in the 1830s and the decadent appropriation of the theme between 1885 and 1920. Monneyron sees in this move 'une dégradation totale' of the Romantic myth while

aesthete, as we shall see, also reinforces the French idea that the Annamite elite were caught in their age-old traditions without any desire for change.

¹⁰⁰ The extent to which Pouvourville's political stance may be considered by his contemporaries to be 'destabilising' can be measured when one compares his admiration of Asian arts and wisdom with the negative and racist responses of the French general public to the pavilions of Indochina at the 1889 'Exposition universelle' in Paris (Deyasi, 'French Visual Culture and "Indochina"', pp. 20-1).

Yee, following Catherine Lingua's study on the decadent androgyne in Wilde and Rachilde, identifies this change as being a movement from mysticism to eroticism.¹⁰¹ In an echo of this erotic turn, George Mosse identifies the *fin-de-siècle* transformation of the androgyne into 'the symbol of vice and sexual perversity' as a reaction against the increasingly dominant heterosexual norms where sexual difference forms the underlining feature.¹⁰²

Pouvoirville's colonial androgynes are embodied in two contrasting figures: the Chinese warlord and the Annamite prince. While they are both real historical figures, they symbolise, in his aestheticist project, the two types of the androgyne: Ong-Luu as the mystical androgyne in contrast to the erotic, if not overtly homosexual, androgynous Hoang-Ké-Viem. Although they represent distinct types of the androgyne, both are portrayed in keeping with the decadent fascination for perversity and corruption marked by homoeroticism – latent (for the Chinese character) and overt (for the Annamite character).

Both the Chinese and the Annamite androgynes are first and foremost portrayed as effeminate 'lettrés'. However, while the Chinese Ong-Luu is depicted as a precocious *lettré*-warrior, the Annamite prince seems to be an Indochinese avatar of the iconic Des Esseintes.

Ong-Luu is thus 'un homme jeune [...] sans armes, *la taille élancée*, le visage d'une blancheur singulière, les traits réguliers et *doux*, l'œil éclatant et fixe, la bouche très grave, *le doigt levé en signe de silence et de commandement*' (p. 33. My emphasis).¹⁰³ In contrast to the Chinese warrior, the prince Hoang-Ké-Viem appears to be a degenerate aristocrat, 'issu du vieux sang royal d'Annam' (p. 84), who is more of an aesthete than a warrior (p. 84-5). In addition, while the Chinese effeminate pirate is a sage who follows ancient Taoist and Buddhist traditions and teachings through the practice of contemplation and non-action (p. 35-6), the Annamite degenerate prince is presented as a refined pleasure-seeker. He indulges himself in

¹⁰¹ Monneyron, *L'Androgyne décadent*, p. 10, Yee, "Indochine androgyne", 269-82 (p. 272), and Catherine Lingua, *Ces anges du bizarre: regard sur une aventure esthétique de la Décadence* (Paris: Nizet, 1995), p. 56.

¹⁰² *The Image of Man*, p. 92.

¹⁰³ Pouvoirville, Albert de, *L'Annam sanglant* (Paris: Kailash, [1898] 1995).

sensuality among ‘Sa troupe efféminée’ (p. 85-6) and loves to wallow in ‘d’intellectuelles voluptés’ that only ‘les esprits les mieux affinés par les décadences des civilisations asiatiques’ can savour (p. 96). The portrait of the Annamite prince as the ‘grand seigneur oriental’ (p. 96) is an echo of the familiar model of the Oriental despot as visually epitomised by Delacroix’s Orientalist paintings, particularly in *La Mort de Sardanapale* (1827), with Far Eastern colouration exemplified by its many ethnographic references.

Significantly, Pouvoirville’s portrait of Ong-Luu as a youth, a decadent ‘éphèbe’, goes against historical fact since Ong-Luu was already a 46-year-old man at the time of the Son Tay events. Similarly, the portrait of Hoang-Ké-Viem as a degenerate aesthete contradicts the historical record. This leader of the Annamite imperial resistance had in fact played a major role in fighting against banditry, particularly the Yellow Flags, for the Nguyen Dynasty and was already involved in Francis Garnier’s death before the Son Tay battles.¹⁰⁴ His wife was also the daughter of the emperor Minh Mang. This deliberate choice is part of a distinctive aesthetic project which consists of proposing new types of (anti-)hero by drawing on decadent gender terms.

Within Pouvoirville’s decadent project, these two androgynous figures come to represent two different, albeit overlapping, visions of the exotic *Extrême-Orient*: homoerotic heroism and homosexual perversity.¹⁰⁵ This contrasting conception of Indochina is epitomised in the overtly homoerotic ‘dance scene’.

In preparation for the French attack of Son Tay, Ong-Luu calls on the prince to move from his camp in the nearby town to Son Tay. The prince grudgingly arrives in the

¹⁰⁴ For his role in the fight against banditry in Tonkin and his relationship with Liu Yongfu, see Bradley Davis, ‘States of Banditry: The Nguyen Government, Bandit Rule, and the Culture of Power in the Post-Taiping China-Vietnam Borderlands’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Washington, 2008).

¹⁰⁵ The concept of homoeroticism and homosociality are borrowed from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1985). Along with these two concepts, the two different degrees of male effeminacy reaffirm the valorisation of the Chinese over the Annamites mentioned earlier as well as articulating the French colonial conception of hatred between the two races (for example, the term ‘ennemi’ is used by Ong-Luu speaking of Hoang (p. 97) and Ong-Luu’s soldiers steal and commit crimes against the Annamite inhabitants in and around Son Tay while waiting for the French attack).

company of his ‘interprète *favor*’ and his exclusively male and unarmed court (p. 88. My emphasis). Envious of the Chinese leader’s ‘tranquille sérénité’ (p. 97), he has in mind a vicious plan to corrupt him through an all-male dance.

Aware of this, Ong-Luu attends the spectacle with a double intention: to experience ‘la sensation étrange, tangible à l’œil seul et la braver en vainqueur’. Focusing on ‘androgynique maigreur’ (p. 104), this male dance is depicted in tune with decadent exoticism as being at once Mannerist, hieratic and disturbing (p. 99). It aims at titillating same-sex erotic desire based on the aestheticised plasticity of male naked bodies ‘représentant la passion la plus chaude avec la suprême indolence du prêtre accomplissant un rite légendaire’ (p. 100). The scene could hardly be more explicit about the Annamite prince’s homosexual proclivities.

Not only do these dancers remind the reader of the familiar decadent visual and textual images of Salomé’s Oriental dance, they also participate in the wider decadent project of rewriting the heterosexual Salomé myth as a narrative of homosexual desire.¹⁰⁶ These Indochinese male dancers represent an intriguing homoerotic version of the female Asian dance inspired by the Javanese dancers showcased in the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris and much celebrated by the Parisian avant-garde artists and the wider French public. Significantly, this homoerotic troupe anticipates the reception of the female Khmer dancers or ‘danseuses cambodgiennes’ who visited France in 1906 and were one of the powerful representatives of Indochinese art and culture during the colonial period.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Kevin Kopelson, *Love’s Litany: The Writing of Modern Homoerotics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 15-48.

¹⁰⁷ This point will be developed in Chapter Three. Marco Deyasi points out that at the end of the nineteenth century, the French public tended to connect Java with Cambodia, and hence Indochina, because of their imperfect knowledge of the new Far Eastern colony (Deyasi, ‘French Visual Culture and “Indochina”’, p. 4). Although the female ‘danseuses cambodgiennes’ did not visit France until 1906, photo-postcards showcasing them had already been widely disseminated among the French public. For example, Gauguin saw Javanese dance at the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris and likened it to the Cambodian dance that he knew from a photo he owned (p. 69).

Ultimately, by intertwining homoeroticism with exotic liturgy, this ‘muette interprétation des cérémonies antiques’ (p. 100) is elevated to the aestheticist realm of ‘la forme pure’ (p. 104) as a ‘tableau rare’ (p. 106). Homosexuality is thus at once pathologised as part of ‘toutes les séries du vice’ (p. 97) specific to the Oriental effeminate male, and, at the same time, ambiguously neutralised and aestheticised as ‘le spectacle enivrant et défendu’ (p. 106). The male-to-male gaze is mapped onto the ‘imperialist gaze’ directed towards the indigenous androgynous body in such a way that the line between mystical androgyny and homosexuality comes to be blurred.

Indeed, judging from his ‘tristesse reprocheuse’ (p. 104) in response to this homosexual temptation, Ong-Luu, though governed by spiritual non-action, appears nevertheless to be unexpectedly troubled. If he is depicted as a spiritual androgyne in contrast to the homosexual Annamite prince, this sage-warrior is nonetheless entangled in homoerotic relations, particularly with his adopted son-disciple, Ba-Duong. Ba-Duong, ‘le plus fidèle serviteur et l’ami préféré’ (p. 34-5), who was a real historic figure, is also depicted as an androgynous youth, ten years younger, ‘avec son beau timbre de voix d’éphèbe’ (p. 69). In this platonic and avuncular, yet ambiguous, ‘amitié singulière’ (p. 51), the couple is tied together by military, pseudo-filial, and spiritual values. Ong-Luu elects his young *protégé* as his successor and takes charge of his education (p. 36). It is to be noted that the same adjective ‘favori’ is used here as it is for depicting Hoang’s male harem, pointing to a certain porosity between homoeroticism and homosexuality. This kind of homoerotic bond within the military tradition is reminiscent of the famous 4th-century BC Theban Band, or Sacred Band of Thebes. The story of 150 pairs of male lovers who formed the 300 elite soldiers of the Theban army was recorded by Plutarch, among others, and mentioned in Plato’s *Symposium* by the character Phaedrus.

Interestingly, the homoerotic couple Ong-Lu/Ba-Duong echoes the relationship between Pouvourville and his spiritual disciple and military subaltern Nguyen Van Cang

(Figure 8). The latter was the son of Nguyen Can Lu, a village leader and a Taoist master. In a document dated from May 19th 1891, Nguyen Can Lu gave his authorisation for his son to become a soldier under the protection of Pouvourville who was at the time the commander of a unit of indigenous militia. Remarking on ‘l’ambiguïté de cette filiation’,¹⁰⁸ Jean-Pierre Laurant points out that this can be seen, by occultists, as a Taoist transmission; by the literary public, as an extraordinary adventure, and lastly, by the colonial administration, as an exemplary exchange with indigenous traditional authority. In whatever form this cross-cultural encounter is understood, it seems to be projected into fiction, either contemporaneously or through foreshadowing, in the form of a homoerotic-cum-spiritual relationship.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, it is his subaltern soldier who assisted Pouvourville in his translation and commentary of *Tao Te King: La Voie métaphysique* (1905) and *La Voie rationnelle* (1907). This collaboration has been mentioned only in passing by most commentators on Pouvourville.¹¹⁰

If the decadent framing of homoeroticism in its double articulation – as mystical androgyny and homosexuality – aims at constructing all Asian androgynes as civilisationally decadent, racially and biologically inferior and pathologically perverse, in the case of Ong-Lu specifically, it is also informed by contemporary medical discourses concerning ‘neurasthenia’. This metropolitan component lends a modern feature to the Chinese warlord, preparing the ground for seeing the androgyne type as a model of alternative manhood.

The *Fin-de-siècle* Neurasthenic Man

At the end of the first Pont de Papier battle near Hanoi, having learnt of Ba-Duong’s death, ‘Luu retomba à terre avec un sanglot, et cacha sa tête dans les cheveux dénoués et sanglants

¹⁰⁸ Laurant, *Matgioi: un aventurier taoïste*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁹ It is difficult to be sure whether the writing of *L’Annam sanglant* happened before Pouvourville’s acquaintance with the Taoist master and his son Nguyen Van Cang. However, the Taoist inspiration pervading the novel leads to the hypothesis that he had probably already been initiated into Taoism by that time.

¹¹⁰ The only exception is J.-P. Laurant (*Matgioi: un aventurier taoïste*, p. 70).

de l'ami qu'il n'entendait plus' (p. 79). This outbreak of emotions – 'râclant le sol de ses ongles, ayant aux lèvres le rictus du tigre et à l'œil, l'éclair mortel du glaive' (p. 78-9), – evokes the classical episode of Achilles mourning the death of Patroclus in the *Iliad*. This Homeric scene has been often discussed by queer theorists and classicists as an ancient paradigm for male homoerotic relations.¹¹¹

Alongside this homoerotic intertextuality, Ong-Luu's display of uncontrollable passion can also be linked to contemporary medical and psychiatric discourse concerning 'neurasthenia' that affected first and foremost *fin-de-siècle* men, rather than women. A protean pathology, neurasthenia can be said to signify a state of extreme fatigue, emotivity and nervousness due to the hyperstimulation inherent in modernity.

Within the widespread discourse of degeneracy theory, the neurasthenic man was often believed to have 'a hereditary predisposition to nervousness' ready to be triggered by modern existence and passed on to his children.¹¹² Insistence on the antique traditions of Asian culture and Ong-Lu's atavistic racial character seems to prepare the reader for this framework while giving a colonial version to this metropolitan-focused pathology.

One of the major syndromes affecting the neurasthenic man includes excessive sensibility. This emotivity is, on one hand, seen *positively* as a sign of the elevated and delicate sensibility of bourgeois, artistic men, in a way that can be applied to the refined decadent aesthete. Yet, on the other hand, the inability to control one's emotions is *negatively* identified with the collapse of 'the bounded and autonomous male self', reflected in an inability to control oneself sexually. A 'sexual or genital neurasthenia' constituting a separate distinct

¹¹¹ See for example K. J. Dover and others, *Greek Homosexuality* (London: Bloomsbury, [1978] 2016), Laguna-Mariscal Gabriel and Sanz-Morales Manuel, 'Was the Relationship between Achilles and Patroclus Homoerotic? The View of Apollonius Rhodius', *Hermes*, 133 (2005), 120-23, and W. M. Clarke, 'Achilles and Patroclus in Love', *Hermes*, 106 (1978), 381-96.

¹¹² Forth, 'Neurasthenia and Manhood in Fin-de-Siècle France', 329-61 (p. 331).

disorder is partly explained as the result of homosexuality.¹¹³ While academic medical texts rarely made explicit connection between neurasthenia and male effeminacy, neurasthenia was nevertheless linked, in wider culture, to homosexuality. At a time when the French felt they were experiencing a national crisis of masculinity; neurasthenia was seen as a threat and symptom of this crisis and of racial degeneration. Decadent discourse generally picks up on the ambivalence of this pathology, in which the neurasthenic aesthete's effeminacy is seen in a negative light and yet, paradoxically, as a condition to be celebrated or at least explored.

Ong-Lu's weeping for his beloved's death echoes the feminine image of the 'weeping man' pathologised at the *fin de siècle* as part of the set of neurasthenic symptoms, in opposition to the 'manly ideal'.¹¹⁴ However, if his Asian hereditary and cultural traits have contributed to this pathological diagnosis, they also, for the very same reasons, contribute to characterise him in a positive light as heroic and virile.

The Ethics of the Martial Androgyne

The theme of military bravery is thus unexpectedly bound up with Oriental esotericism to valorise this decadent *éphèbe* as the powerful martial model of the 'moral war hero'. Taking up the decadent project of sexual ambiguity and colonial effeminacy, Pouvourville reinvents it by exploring an alternative version of manhood that depends on Far Eastern spirituality in which androgyny and militarism are not incompatible. This colonial version of virility is counter-normative as it is constructed at once in opposition to and, paradoxically, in tandem with the classic 'modèle militaro-viril' of French and European heroes during the colonial

¹¹³ Forth, 'Neurasthenia and Manhood in Fin-de-Siècle France', p. 334 and 337. For the link between crying and homosexuality, see also Régis Revenin, 'Homosexualité et virilité', in Corbin, Courtine, and Virello, *Histoire de la virilité*, p. 373.

¹¹⁴ Forth points out that a shift in the 'formation of a new sensibility, a new way of managing emotions and of maintaining boundaries around the self that could nevertheless be breached under circumstances of extreme pressure or constitutional weakness' occurred by 1880s. This happened in contrast to an earlier image of the more weeping man who was valorised particularly in religious and evangelical discourses in the early nineteenth century ('Neurasthenia and Manhood in Fin-de-Siècle France', p. 336).

conquests.¹¹⁵ The rewriting of the historical episodes of Henri Rivière's death and the ultimate Son Tay battles function as the testing ground for virility and as an *exposé* concerning the question of ethics for the protagonist Ong-Luu.

In colonial historiography, Henri Rivière was characterised as a war hero. His death was traditionally presented as the decisive moment in the Tonkin affairs and as the main reason for an 'impératif moral de la politique française' seeking revenge.¹¹⁶ The precise circumstances of Rivière's death remains unclear: either he was killed on the battlefield, or he was captured, tortured and killed by the indigenous forces. In Pouvoirville's version, the second hypothesis is adopted with deliberately fictionalised variants.

Struck by bullets during the battle of the Pont de Papier, Rivière loses consciousness and is captured by one of Ong-Luu's generals, who brings him back to Ong-Luu's residence in Son Tay. In distress following the news of the death of his beloved disciple, Ong-Luu orders the execution of the French officer, transforming himself from 'le prophète, le sage' into 'le justicier, le vengeur' (p. 78). The following day, emerging from his sorrow, Ong-Luu commands, to his soldiers' surprise, the retreat of his victorious army, rather than continuing to attack and take back Hanoi (p. 81). This unexpected retreat is in fact the result of Ong-Luu's re-evaluation of his decision as 'un mal' since he could have exchanged the captive for the liberation of Hanoi citadel: 'En cela, j'ai transgressé la Loi, qui ne veut point que l'on verse un sang inutile' (p. 82-3). This 'Law' refers to the sacred book of Yiking (p. 35). This

¹¹⁵ Christelle Taraud, 'La virilité en situation coloniale', in Corbin, Courtine, and Virello, *Histoire de la virilité*, pp. 336-7. The model for the virile conqueror during the Third Republic is embodied in the 'fondateurs de l'Empire colonial' like the military Gallieni and Lyautey (Jean-Paul Bertaud, 'La virilité militaire', in Corbin, Courtine, and Virello, *Histoire de la virilité*, p. 199). Pouvoirville was acquainted with General Lyautey to whom he dedicates the poem 'L'Arrêt', depicting the execution of a young Annamite rebel presided over by the mandarin auxiliary of the 'Barbares' French (*Rimes d'Asie*, pp. 19-20). It is also to be noted that Lyautey was known to be homosexual and his writings about Africa and African youth are imbued with homoeroticism (Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, p. 1).

¹¹⁶ Fourniau, *Vietnam. Domination coloniale et résistance nationale*, p. 324. However, as Fourniau remarks, this colonialist narrative masks the fact that the Tonkin adventure was an absurd situation where thousands of French soldiers were sent to a land of 10 million inhabitants sharing a border with China, and 12 000 km away from France. Moreover, this noble motive was only to disguise the real pressure put forward by the 'affairesistes' upon the French government to secure commercial routes and industrial prospects, particularly for the 'Tonkin-mines' in the Gulf of Tonkin (p. 321-2).

act of 'transgression' is judged as such according to Taoist ethics and morality and presented as the chief reason for his ultimate defeat in Son Tay.

In making up for his first response motivated by homoerotic, hence *feminine*, emotions, Ong-Luu's redemptive action, commanded by his noble Taoist ethics, not only points to his *masculine* constitution, but it also echoes the French nineteenth-century bourgeoisie's 'male code of honour'. By its standard, courage is considered 'the most splendid adornment of the man of honour'.¹¹⁷

His courage, fierceness, and at times cruelty (he beheads one of his generals on the battlefield when the latter calls for retreat without his permission, p. 175-6), as well as authority are highlighted over the course of the novel. Transported back to his house, Ong-Luu commands dying and injured soldiers who cannot flee Son Tay to be carried there. They are to be given '[s]es réserves d'opium' to smoke (p. 203) while preparing for the arrival of the French. The novel ends with the soldiers' love and fidelity for their elected leader, thus portraying Ong-Luu as a compassionate war general. Yet this heroic hecatomb is rendered with a decadent touch of sadomasochism as 'les voix mourantes s'élevaient en un gémississement d'amour' (p. 205).

Ultimately, before retreating to the countryside, the Chinese warrior reaffirms his status as a military strategist by asking one of his loyal followers to stay on to serve the French: 'Sers les faces blanches s'il te faut, et en les servant, sers-moi' (p. 204). This hints to an internal nationalist dissidence *within* the French colonial power-base right from the outset, in divergence with colonial historiography. The novel's end effectively moves away from ambiguous homoeroticism towards a valorisation of the homosocial bond that underlines military camaraderie. Ong-Lu's ethical heroism offers an unexpected validation of colonial

¹¹⁷ Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour*, p. 14.

androgyny that is paradoxically predicated on the ideal of Western virility as well as Eastern ethics.

This new form of ‘colonial virility’ which relies on decadence’s potential for oppositionality shatters the neat binary of femininity/masculinity, effeminate cowardice/military bravery, and finally Eastern effeminacy/Western virility. Martial attributes are even attributed to the androgynous dancers of Hoang Ké Viem’s homosexually-charged Annamite court. At the end of the dance scene, in response to Ong-Luu’s contemptuous challenge of their capacity to fight against the French, Hoang answers: ‘mes jeunes hommes à l’occasion, sous leurs jambes de femmes, ont le jarret de fer des guerriers, et sous leur sourire d’enfant, l’âme de pierre des sacrificateurs’ (p. 107).

Pouvourville’s radical gender counter-narrative engages not only with the colonised subject’s and his Chinese ally’s manhood, but also the metropolitan ‘manly ideal’ and its perceived state of crisis more broadly. The decline of the birth rate in *fin-de-siècle* France, particularly that of the male newborns, and anxieties about the number of available soldiers, contributed to the focus on manhood as both cause and symptom of cultural degeneration. These anxieties, combined with a socio-cultural application of the theory of degeneration, generated a perceived crisis of manhood in France.¹¹⁸ Literary critics have persuasively argued for the decadent androgyne’s role as the emblem of this cultural crisis in metropolitan literature. Accordingly, the indigenous androgyne in colonial literature can be seen as a projection of ‘the crisis of sexuality onto the “Other”, so that Indochina came to epitomise the sexual levelling that was seen as a threat to French society itself.’¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Robert Nye has discussed how the theory of hereditary degeneration was used to think about and explain social pathologies and how this ‘medical model of cultural crisis’ was linked to French national anxieties, particularly the widespread concerns associated with depopulation and the crisis of manhood by the end of the nineteenth century. See his *Crime, Madness & Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline*, and ‘Degeneration and the Medical Model of Cultural Crisis’. For statistics concerning the decline of male birth rates and its implications, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour*, pp. 72-97.

¹¹⁹ Yee, “Indochine androgyne”, 269-82 (p. 273).

Yet, while *L'Annam sanglant* can be seen as a displacement of the metropolitan crisis of masculinity, the novel responds to this crisis in an innovative way. Through a kind of 'cultural and racial transvestism',¹²⁰ Pouvourville proposes an alternative model of masculinity that initiates a reverse cross-cultural trajectory back from the circumference of the empire to its metropolitan centre. This alternative masculinity, in which femininity is not exclusively the opposite of martial, and hence masculine, attributes, is all the more subversive because it questions the heteronormative concept of metropolitan masculinity as a totality in which 'body and soul, outward appearance and inward virtue were supposed to form one harmonious whole, a perfect construct where every part was in its place'.¹²¹ In some respects, this gender/body/mind disintegration echoes the decadent literary style of independence of the parts from the whole as famously defined by Paul Bourget.¹²² In the passage discussing Bourget's definition, the anti-decadent Max Nordau condemns Decadence as the cause of 'l'anarchie et la ruine de la communauté'.¹²³

Considering these cultural comments in light of the period identified by historians as the age of the rediscovery of the body in the West, Ong-Luu's (mis)matching of the effeminate body with manly virtues valorises sexual 'anarchy' as a creative way out of pathologised effeminacy. The latter haunts not just metropolitan decadent literature, but also the extra-literary world of modern bourgeois masculinity in which mental and non-manual labour is 'a persistent source of anxiety' vis à vis the traditional "'ideology of adventure" that had since the Middle Ages structured the expectations and emotional investments of western men'.¹²⁴ In valuing the ethical aspect of the unmanly man, Pouvourville seems to respond to

¹²⁰ The term is borrowed from Dollimore's discussion of sexually dissident European travellers and adventurers. See Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

¹²¹ Mosse, *The Image of Man*, p. 5.

¹²² Bourget talks about a series of 'decomposition' between words and sentences, sentences and pages, pages and the book, resulting in the 'indépendance' between all these parts (*Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, vol. 1, p. 20).

¹²³ Nordau, *Dégénérescence*, p. 347.

¹²⁴ Forth, 'Neurasthenia and Manhood in Fin-de-Siècle France', 329-61 (p. 332).

the nineteenth-century ‘medicalisation of morality’ that increasingly associated physical degeneracy with vice, ‘for moral sickness left its imprint on the body and face.’¹²⁵ Against this stigmatisation, Pouvourville’s androgyne can be seen as heralding – not in its emphasis on effeminacy but rather on its reimagining of alternative masculinity against metropolitan bourgeois norm – the decolonised figure of the ‘new man’ theorised by Frantz Fanon as an integral part of his articulation of the anti-colonial struggle.¹²⁶

L’Annam sanglant’s radical repositioning of Western heterosexual norms echoes the gendered view of France’s North African colonies as the ‘dernier champ d’expériences de l’occident’ in terms of alternative sexualities.¹²⁷ Formulated by François Augiéras (1925-71) whose uninhibited homosexual writings were the product of French-North African sexual and intercultural contacts, ‘une nouvelle définition de l’homme apparai[t] plus clairement sur les frontières de l’Europe qu’en Europe même (un art des Grandes Frontières).’¹²⁸ Although this view of the colony unquestionably reiterates Orientalist fantasies about the Orient, and the modern Islamic world as a sexually permissive space, it nevertheless highlights, particularly with regard to Augiéras’s ‘transcendental feeling’ about North Africa,¹²⁹ the positive regenerative and liberating power of the colony. In the same manner that the *fin-de-siècle* crisis of manhood has been seen as being linked to the political and cultural crisis at the turn of the century, there seems to be a connection between political instabilities in the colonies and a questioning of gender norms, particularly in the re-alignment of manhood, that at times amounts to anti-colonial discourse.

¹²⁵ Mosse, *The Image of Man*, p. 80.

¹²⁶ An alternative view of masculinity known as the ‘new man’ were particularly articulated during the 1920s in the figures of the soldier and the socialist (Mosse, *The Image of Man*, p. 108 and 119-32). Later, the concept of the ‘new man’ taken up by Franz Fanon, in his *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, [1952] 1992) can be understood not only as part of emerging decolonised masculinity, but also as ‘metonymic for a larger (re)imagining of colonised subjectivity’ (Reeser and Seifert, *Entre Hommes: French and Francophone Masculinities in Culture and Theory*, p. 39).

¹²⁷ François Augiéras, *Le Voyage des morts* (n.p.: Fata Morgana, [1959] 1979), p. 94.

¹²⁸ Augiéras, *Le Voyage des morts*, p. 125.

¹²⁹ Aldrich, ‘Homosexuality in the French Colonies’, 201-18 (p. 212). In his discussion of the links between the (homo)sexual and literary life of Augiéras and Jean Genet, Aldrich argues for the connection between eroticism and political revolution, wholeheartedly embraced in the case of Genet.

* * * * *

From the perspective of colonial discourse, Pouvourville's political stance is complex, since the narrative adopts a double identification with both the French and their enemies. On one hand, Henri Rivière's defeat parallels the 1870 French defeat by Prussia, which acquired its real heroic significance within the French tradition of 'noble defeats' in the ultimate victory at the end of the Son Tay battles. This is not to mention laudatory passages on French officers like Admiral Courbet, Francis Garnier or Auguste Pavie. On the other hand, through the narrative strategy of adopting the point of view of the native, Pouvourville not only attempts to give subjectivity to the indigenous subjects but also glorifies the enemy's defeat as equally noble and heroic. This double identification provides a contradictory ending that abets French colonialism's political ends while valorising Asian culture. This is oppositional in relation to the dominant colonial ideology that saw non-European cultures and peoples as the primitive Other, an ideology that underpins the moral duty of the French as a civilising nation.¹³⁰

Indeed, *L'Annam sanglant* offers a complex and ambiguous response to early French colonialism in Indochina, reflecting the author's own problematic position in a period when Pouvourville was not entirely incorporated into colonial officialdom, and the French state had not yet recuperated his alternative vision into its conception of Indochina.¹³¹ Pouvourville was involved in the activities of the *Institut colonial international* in 1898 and the general secretary to the *Comité des Congrès coloniaux* in 1904.¹³² When he wrote *L'Annam sanglant*, however, literary experimentation that diverged from the traditional heteroerotic colonialist narrative was still possible. Praised by contemporaries as one of the masterpieces

¹³⁰ For a study on the process of erasure of the subjectivity of the Other, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, [1983] 2014), and Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*.

¹³¹ On his critique of colonialism, despite being a government agent, see Laurant, *Matgioi: un aventurier taoïste*, p. 30 and 41. His involvement in Parisian esoteric circles, marked by anti-colonial and oppositional vision *vis-à-vis* the French government, will be discussed in Chapter Three.

¹³² Laurant, *Matgioi: un aventurier taoïste*, p. 43.

of Indochinese colonial literature in terms of the author's profound knowledge of Indochina, *L'Annam sanglant* undeniably contributed to Pouvoirville's lifelong 'identity' as both 'l'initiateur de la littérature française d'Extrême-Orient' and 'L'Asiatique de France'.¹³³

De-politicising Decadence through Parodic Homosexuality in Claude Farrère's *Les Civilisés*

Considered at the *fin de siècle* as one of the 'perverse', if not the most dangerous, forms of sexuality, male homosexuality poses a threat to the Third Republic's discourse on nationhood, which is essentially built on gender and class order, racial bonds, and the idea of producing new generations.¹³⁴ This is an area that has received most attention in scientific writings from the emerging fields of sexology and psychiatry. But the subject is relatively little written about in colonial writings, although it is suspected and feared by all, as testified in medical writings concerning 'diseases' in the colonies.¹³⁵

In a surprisingly similar manner, in his discussion of 'Oriental Sex', while discussing at length heterosexual experiences between Oriental women and Western writers, Said omits to name the homosexual experiences some of these writers, particularly Flaubert and the homosexual Gide, had recounted as taking place during their voyage. Instead, he adopts a

¹³³ His recognised role as one of the founding figures of French Indochinese literature was formalised in the prestigious banquet organised by the government-propaganda journal *Le Monde Nouveau* for the 25th anniversary of the publication of the novel *L'Annam sanglant* in 1923 and presided over by the minister of colonies and a former General Governor of Indochina, Albert Sarraut (*Compte rendu du banquet organisé par 'Le Monde Nouveau' pour fêter les Noces d'Argent littéraires de l'auteur de 'L'Annam sanglant' et le cinquième anniversaire de la fondation de la dite revue* (Paris: Éditions du Monde Nouveau, 1923), p. 1). Pouvoirville is called 'L'Asiatique de France' in a review of *Rimes d'Asie* by Frangipane (pseudonym), in *Les Pages indochinoises*, 1e année, n°4, 15 octobre 1912, p. 66.

¹³⁴ Éric Bordas, 'Introduction: Comment en parlait-on?', *Romantisme*, 159 (2013), 3-17 (p. 6). Increasingly preoccupied by depopulation, *fin-de-siècle* French society stigmatised all forms of non-procreative sex and seminal waste, as exemplified in Zola's opinion on the threat of inversion: 'Un inverti est un désorganisateur de la famille, de la nation, de l'humanité. L'homme et la femme ne sont certainement ici-bas que pour faire des enfants, et il tue la vie le jour où ils ne font plus ce qu'il faut pour en faire.' (Émile Zola, 'Préface' to Doctor Laupps, *Tares et poisons. Perversions et perversités sexuelles* (Paris: Masson et Cie, Libraires de l'académie de médecine, 1896), p. 4). He develops the theme at length in his novel *Fécondité* (1899), which makes use of colonization as a utopian promise of infinite fertility. See Andrew J. Counter, 'Zola's fin-de-siècle Reproductive Politics', *French Studies*, 68 (2014), 193-208.

¹³⁵ See Aldrich, 'Homosexuality in the French Colonies', 201-18. Ann Laura Stoler similarly observes the 'absent presence of the dangers of homosexuality' in late nineteenth-century colonial discourse (*Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 129, note 96).

euphemism, allusively stating that these writers often looked for ‘a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden’.¹³⁶

It has been widely accepted since Michel Foucault’s pioneering work on the history of sexuality that the concept of homosexuality dates to the nineteenth century.¹³⁷ However, far from being a strict ‘invention’ *ex nihilo*, cultural historians have recently been exploring, in a more nuanced manner, the emergence of the modern concept of homosexuality in its relation to a broader cultural context linked to various fields of knowledge.

The invention of the neologism *homosexualität* occurred in German in 1869 to denote same-sex sexual practice, while its antithesis, ‘heterosexuality’, was coined later in 1893 in German, and in French in 1894.¹³⁸ The words ‘homosexuel’ and ‘homosexualité’ first appeared in French in the 1890s mostly in scientific texts and avant-garde circles before its usage became widespread by the end of the Second World War.¹³⁹ Prior to this, there were in French several terms used to depict same-sex sexuality with different connotations, ranging from religious and naturalist to references to Classical same-sex practice, such as ‘sodomite’, ‘anti-physique’, ‘pédéraste’, with a greater range in slang and colloquial language.¹⁴⁰ At the end of the century, other terms such as ‘uraniste’, ‘similisxuel’ and ‘unisxuel’ were also introduced but never gained currency in French society.

¹³⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 190. In his letters, the enthusiastic heterosexual Flaubert gave an account of his experimentation with boys in the baths under the pretext of wanting to learn more about oriental civilisation: ‘– À propos, tu me demandes si j’ai consommé l’œuvre des bains. Oui, et sur un jeune gaillard gravé de la petite vérole et qui avait un énorme turban blanc. Ça m’a fait rire, voilà tout. Mais je recommencerai. Pour qu’une expérience soit bien faite, il faut qu’elle soit réitérée.’ (Lettre de Flaubert à Louis Bouilhet, quoted in Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion*, pp. 112-3).

¹³⁷ ‘La notion d’homosexualité est une notion qui date du XIX^e siècle, et est donc très tardive’ in his interview with Jean Le Bitoux in 1978 (*Entretiens sur la question gay* (n.p.: Béziers, H & O éditions, 2005), p. 46).

¹³⁸ Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, [1995] 2007).

¹³⁹ The trial of Oscar Wilde contributed to this dissemination in French artistic circles; controversial articles were written and exchanged in journals such as *La Revue blanche* and *Le Mercure de France*.

¹⁴⁰ The original classical meaning of the term, ‘pédéraste’, which connoted intergenerational sex between an older man and a younger boy, was becoming less common during the nineteenth century and the word came to be used as a synonym for ‘homosexual’ until the 1950s-60s (Régis Revenin, ‘Homosexualité et virilité’, in Corbin, Courtine, and Virello, *Histoire de la virilité*, p. 369, and Vernon A. Rosario, *The Erotic Imagination: French Histories of Perversity* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 192). For a discussion of these terms see also Claude Courouve, *Vocabulaire de l’homosexualité masculine* (Paris: Payot, 1985), Bordas, ‘Introduction: Comment en parlait-on?’, 3-17, and William A. Peniston, *Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2004), p. 91.

The emergence of the word ‘homosexuality’ introduced a whole new conception of modern sexual identity. From sodomy viewed as ‘un type d’actes interdits’, ‘l’homosexualité du XIX^e siècle est devenu un personnage’, a species, ‘une espèce’, in its own right.¹⁴¹ This happened through the ‘process of medicalising and pathologising sexual identity’ that consists of converting ‘a *behaviour*’ into ‘an *identity*’.¹⁴² In France, more than any other country in Europe due to the perceived cultural crisis discussed earlier, the homosexual was unsympathetically framed as part of ‘pathological sexuality’ within a discourse of perversion linked to degeneracy.¹⁴³

Modern homosexuality at the *fin de siècle* came to be predominantly associated with effeminacy to create the type of the ‘effeminate invert’ that overshadows other forms of homosexuality.¹⁴⁴ Hence, ‘avant la fin du XIX^e siècle, l’on pouvait très bien être homosexuel et/ou avoir des relations homosexuelles sans nécessairement montrer publiquement des comportements dits “homosexuels”, c’est-à-dire supposément contraires aux normes traditionnelles de la virilité, comme le fait d’être efféminé ou maniéré.’¹⁴⁵ The thin line that separates effeminate men, such as the figure of the homoerotic androgyne explored above, from men who engage in same-sex eroticism, was thus crossed with the new figure of the

¹⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), vol. 1, p. 59.

¹⁴² Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour*, p. 102.

¹⁴³ Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* p. 21. For a study of inversion as a pathology in medical discourse, see Rosario, *The Erotic Imagination*, pp. 69-111. The famous paper co-authored by the French neurologists and psychiatrists Jean-Martin Charcot and Valentin Magnan, ‘Inversion du sens génital’ (1882) offered the first systematic model and terms for the fetishistic nature of sexual perversion. Homosexuality seen here as an ‘inversion’ and a perversion refers to ‘a genital perversion in which the genital appetite has fixed itself on a person of the same sex’. On this point, see Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour*, pp. 111-2. Although homosexuality was decriminalised in France since Napoleon’s Civil Code, other repressive strategies were used by the police to control and contain homosexuality.

¹⁴⁴ Physicians such as the medico-legal expert Ambroise Tardieu considered ““pederasts” sartorial and behavioural effeminacy [as] constituted a clear, fixed psychological and ontological marker.” (Rosario, *The Erotic Imagination*, p. 76). Such theories of effeminacy were soon taken up by police ledgers concerning public offenses against decency, before being disseminated to the public by personal memoirs written by the former officials of the Paris police, numerous guidebooks to metropolitan and underground Paris, and the press who, at the turn of the century, came to be interested in homosexual scandals, contributing to an increase in the visibility of this ‘marginal’ group. See William A. Peniston, *Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth-Century Paris* and Michael L. Wilson, ‘Dramas d’amour des pédérastes: Male Same-Sex Sexuality in Belle Epoque Print Culture’, in *Homosexuality in French History and Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Merrick and Michael Sibalís (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2001), pp. 189-200.

¹⁴⁵ Revenin, ‘Homosexualité et virilité’, p. 400.

homosexual. However, as we will see, in contrast to the reputed effeminacy of the metropolitan homosexual, the coloniser could not be effeminate in the same way, as effeminacy in the colonial context is first and foremost perceived as a bio-physiological sign of the colonised's racial inferiority.

The generic term 'homosexuality' employed here refers to this new historical sexual identity – pathological, deviant and degenerate – emerging from the equally new formative field of sexology. While French doctors viewed perversion as both sign and symptom of the rapidly changing urban and industrialised societies, they uneasily linked these modern behaviours to the 'excesses and sexual peculiarities of Imperial Rome'.¹⁴⁶ Cultural Decadence functions as a ready-made discourse available for manipulation by medical scientists confronted with what they perceived as a contemporary pathology that posed a threat at both the personal and national levels.¹⁴⁷ Alongside this moralisation of science, the reverse is also true: medical models were mapped onto cultural phenomena by social scientists and commentators in order to articulate the perceived social and moral problems of their time.¹⁴⁸

This new, and yet unstable, identity of the homosexual will provide the historical context for our discussion of the colonised homosexual and his effeminate native servants in Farrère's *Les Civilisés* (1905).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour*, p. 112.

¹⁴⁷ Mosse, *The Image of Man*, p. 85.

¹⁴⁸ This 'authorised' medical discourse on sexual perversion was soon to be drawn out of the scientific sphere into the wider public, both through the literary fiction of the decadent movement and pseudo-scientific writings such as that of Max Nordau (*Dégénérescence*, 1894). By using medico-scientific knowledge and terms, the former potentially embraces dissident sexualities, while the latter condemns them in order to call for the regeneration of the European society and race.

¹⁴⁹ Female homosexuality or lesbianism is not present in this novel, except as one of the threats posed by the sphinx-like white *femme fatale* Marthe Abel. However, in 'Le Cyclone', one of the short stories in *Fumée d'opium* (1904), Farrère ends his tale with a lesbian scene in an opium den (p. 203). Unlike the haunting fantasy of the Oriental harem in French literature dealing with the Islamic world, lesbianism was not a prominent theme in French colonial literature on Indochina. When present, allusions to lesbianism are mentioned in passing and often set in brothels and opium dens. They are linked generally to a wider atmosphere of loose morality and female availability in a voyeuristic manner. For studies of gay and lesbian visibility in the metropole, see Leslie Choquette, 'Degenerate or Degendered? Images of Prostitution and Homosexuality in the French Third Republic', 205-28, and 'Homosexuals in the City: Representations of Lesbian and Gay Space in Nineteenth-Century Paris', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 41 (2002), 149-67.

Torrall, the Virile Homosexual Coloniser

Among the three protagonists who call themselves the ‘civilisés’ in Farrère’s novel, Torrall is the only character unambiguously portrayed as a ‘homosexual’. A 30-year-old engineer-mathematician, Torrall is unmarried and lives surrounded by Annamite young *boys*¹⁵⁰ far from the European town in ‘un quartier de coolies indigènes et de prostituées’ (p. 18).

During a conversation on female prostitutes in Japan and Indochina with his fellow *civilisés*, the *Marine française* officer Fierce and the Don Juan doctor Mévil, Torrall declares: ‘La question femme sort de ma compétence’ (p. 27). He then goes on to explain his sexual preference in a mathematical equation which results in putting love and woman on one side, and renouncement of both on the other side. In response to Torrall’s sexual formula, Fierce, who doesn’t seem shocked by this ‘vice répugnant de Saïgon’, reveals in passing his occasional engagement with same-sex sexuality: ‘– C’est un moyen [...] Comme extra, par hasard, oui...’ (p. 28). Played out in this short exchange are two forms of homosexuality, echoing the heated debate in the metropole about ‘the problem of distinguishing “true” inverters from those whose homosexual activities were “merely” (or perhaps deviously) situational’. The colonies were particularly associated with ‘situational’ or ‘occasional’ homosexuality like that of Fierce, as attested by the famous expression ‘faire passer son brevet colonial’, meaning to initiate a man into sodomy.¹⁵¹

In contrast, Torrall’s homosexuality points to a deliberate self-conscious homosexual identity, echoing what contemporary scientific jargon called ‘congenital’ homosexuality. The choice to make his home in an ill-reputed area confirms this sense of difference, which he transforms into disdain, arrogantly and unabashedly directed against the heterosexual colonial morality (p. 18, 125): ‘et il affichait jusque dans la rue ses liaisons masculines, et

¹⁵⁰ The French use the English word *boy* to denote, as in English at the time, male indigenous domestic servants in colonial households.

¹⁵¹ Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, p. 1, and ‘Homosexuality in the French Colonies’, 201-18 (p. 201).

promenait en pleine Inspection ses deux boys intimes Bo et Sao' (p. 94).¹⁵² Significantly, Torral did not assume a homosexual identity while he was living in the metropole for he was engaged in a sexual relation with a woman (p. 47-8). It is only in the colony that he can assume his 'exclusive' homosexual love.

This sexually and socially marginal identity is asserted as an identity-choice that is grounded in a perverse philosophy of '(over-)civilisation' inspired by the *fin-de-siècle* vogue of Hegel, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. The 'civilisés' are those who have arrived 'au point le plus haut de la courbe' (p. 28) of civilisation beyond 'ces chimères malfaisantes baptisées "bien" et "mal"'. This is embodied in the motto 'minimum d'effort pour maximum de jouissance' (p. 33). Torral considers himself to have arrived at the highest point in comparison with his heterosexual and occasionally homosexual friends who are 'civilisés, mais pas assez: moins que [lui]' (p. 28).

Torral's homosexuality is a reminiscence and an extension of Des Esseintes's homosexual experience with an effeminate 'éphèbe' for whom 'jamais il n'avait connu des périls pareils'.¹⁵³ However, while this most perverse sexual act represents the culmination of Des Esseintes' sexual degeneracy, leading to his impotence, in keeping with the standard trajectory of the sexual degenerate,¹⁵⁴ Torral's homosexuality in the colony takes, in contrast, a regenerative slant in keeping with colonial ideology.

Despite its non-generative nature, his male same-sex activities are revealed to be 'productive' for his work and role as the *colon-bâtitseur*: 'Eh bien, je fais des mathématiques, et mon boy intime se charge, sans que je m'en préoccupe, de remettre mes nerfs dans le

¹⁵² 'L'Inspection' was a site favoured for strolling and socialising among French elite society.

¹⁵³ J.-K. Huysmans, *À rebours* (Paris: Folio classique, [1884] 2015), p. 194. In contrast to Farrère's relatively explicit treatment of homosexuality, Huysmans' euphemism illustrates the way in which writers before the emergence of modern homosexuality speak about it, in tandem with what Bordas calls 'la lisibilité d'un énoncé absent': 'On ne nomme pas ces inconnus, et l'on ne nomme pas leur différence, mais on laisse comprendre de quoi il s'agit' ('Introduction: Comment en parlait-on?', p. 13 and 16. Emphasis in the text).

¹⁵⁴ This curious association of impotence with homosexuality (and masturbation) was articulated in *fin-de-siècle* medical discourse particularly in discussions of neurasthenia (Forth, 'Neurasthenia and Manhood in Fin-de-Siècle France', 329-61 (p. 337)).

calme qu'il faut.' (p. 33). Decadent and homosexual as Torral may be, he is nevertheless virile, not effeminate: 'C'était un ingénieur, un mathématicien saturé de logique et d'exactitude, – un homme entier, brutal et sec, faisant profession d'égoïsme' (p. 18). In his 'fumerie', Torral's homosexual body is revealed as simultaneously strong and frail: 'un torse tout ensemble *robuste et rachitique*, le torse d'un civilisé qui sans trêve raffine sa cervelle héréditaire, et jette avec mépris son corps à la débauche' (p. 176. My emphasis). His frail, opiate-addicted body is a sign of decadence; yet it is also robust, signifying his virility. This virility has much to do with his intelligence and positivist mind considered masculine, which inspire jealousy even from his compatriots: 'les hommes jalousaient sa lucide intelligence et la supériorité blessante de son savoir et de son talent' (p. 18). Significantly, he is first and foremost a virile coloniser, whose scientific knowledge is essential in the modernisation of Indochina (p. 18).

The *Boy* and Colonial Domestic Service

In contrast to the homosexual coloniser, the discourse of 'primitive homosexuality' is deployed in relation to native practices. This Orientalist form of homosexuality has a long-standing tradition in the Western imaginary and is linked to a wider fantasy of licentious sexuality primarily situated in the Levantine Orient.

'Primitive homosexuality' – defined in an overlapping and ever-changing manner by the physiological, anatomical, and later psychological models – was believed to be widespread in the vast regions generally called the Orient. Later, at the height of imperialism, it was expanded to the Africans and Asians. By the end of the nineteenth century, the emerging discourse on sexual perversion was mapped onto the colonised, albeit with uneasiness, to highlight homosexuality as a sign of their atavistic pathology, hence their racial inferiority. This type of perversion was explained as 'accepted and institutionalised in primitive societies that were below on the evolutionary scale' and 'provided the ferment of debauch.'¹⁵⁵ For

¹⁵⁵ Rudi Bleys, 'Homosexual Exile', pp. 173.

Indochina, the medicalisation of the colonised as perverse forms part of what Frank Proschan calls the ‘colonial construction of Vietnamese diseases’, generally conjoining ‘dangers of “syphilis, opiomania, and pederasty”’.¹⁵⁶

L’Amour aux colonies: singularités physiologiques et passionnelles, a pseudo-scientific essay written by a certain Doctor Jacobus X, attests to this new orientation in the pathologisation of exotic homosexuality, aligning it with a racist worldview and cultural Decadence.¹⁵⁷ Providing an inventory of extra-European sexual practices as well as a catalogue of sexual interactions between European and colonised peoples, this highly popular essay has been described by critics as a ‘porno-ethnography’, yet it is written with pseudo-medical authority, citing famous medico-legal specialists such as Ambroise Tardieu.¹⁵⁸ Although mostly focusing on heterosexuality, homosexuality is discussed particularly in relation to Indochina. Dismissing a theory defended by ‘Annamitophiles’ according to which it was the Europeans who introduced sodomy to the people of Indochina, Jacobus X. advances that ‘L’Annamite est pédéraste, parce qu’il est lascif. C’est *une vieille race civilisée, déjà pourrie*.’¹⁵⁹ He moves on to classify various anatomical signs of sodomy on the Indochinese *boys’* bodies. The image of the endemic homosexual *boy*, as represented in Jacobus’ essay, has a literary echo in Farrère’s novel a decade later.

Moving away from the dominant metropolitan discourse on effeminate homosexuals mentioned earlier, the homosexual Torral is characterised as a virile coloniser, in stark contrast to the effeminate body of the colonised *boys*. Arriving at Torral’s house, Mévil is received by ‘un boy annamite de douze ans qui marchait en se déhanchant comme une femme’ (p. 19). Lying intoxicated in Torral’s opium den (p. 175-77), the boys’ voluptuous

¹⁵⁶ Proschan, “‘Syphilis, Opiomania, and Pederasty’”, 610-36 (p. 611).

¹⁵⁷ Jacobus X., *L’Amour aux colonies: singularités physiologiques et passionnelles, observées durant trente années de séjour dans les colonies françaises, Cochinchine, Tonkin et Cambodge, Guyane et Martinique, Sénégal et Rivière du Sud, Nouvelle Calédonie, Nouvelle-Hébrides et Tahiti* (Paris: Isidore Liseux, 1893).

¹⁵⁸ It was ‘a unique travel guide to sexual practices in the heyday of imperialism’ (Aldrich, ‘Homosexuality in the French Colonies’, 201-18 (p. 205).

¹⁵⁹ Jacobus X., *L’Amour aux colonies*, p. 55. My emphasis.

and sensual postures invoke the clichéd trope of colonial effeminacy in such a way that the Indochinese opium den echoes the Oriental harem even as it stands as a site of homosexual debauchery. As with the homoerotic dance scene in Pouvoirville's *L'Annam sanglant*, the colonised subject's effeminacy appears to represent a natural, biological trait merging primitive homosexuality with modern Indochinese sexual disease. Their effeminacy was seen as an obvious physiological sign of homosexuality pointed to their atavistic 'vice asiatique', which manifested itself in the form of a degenerate body, as discussed at length in Jacobus's *L'Amour aux colonies*. As opposed to both metropolitan homosexuality and the coloniser's homosexuality, homosexuality among the colonised does not characterise only a marginal minority, but an entire population. It becomes a cultural identity.

In the context of colonial discourse on homosexuality, Homi Bhabha's famous argument mentioned in the Introduction according to which the coloniser needs to construe the colonised as 'a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin' needs to be corrected to include gender terms.¹⁶⁰ This cultural identity is also structurally inscribed within the domestic sphere, where intercultural contact between coloniser and colonised runs the risk of interracial crossing. Forming an essential part of colonial household arrangements for 'la vie large', along with the *congai*, the *boy* is from the beginning already de-masculinised through the colonial strategy of domestication. His domestic function is a reminder of the coloniser's domination even in the intimate and private sphere.¹⁶¹ Alongside this symbolic function, physical violence is inherent in Torral's treatment of his *boys* (p. 176-7). Even though Ba and Sao have names, their identity seems interchangeable under their colonial function as *boys*.

In sexual relations, as with the *congai*, the *boy* can only assume the 'passive' role and Torral the 'active' role (in keeping with his virility). Indeed, this is pederasty in the old sense

¹⁶⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 101.

¹⁶¹ Teraud, 'La virilité en situation coloniale', p. 346.

of the term and pedophilia in today's vocabulary. This inter-generational relationship between an older man and adolescent boys is superimposed over the political pattern of an unequal interracial relationship between coloniser and colonised. If, following Roland Barthes, in the French postcolonial imagination, the African *boy* is 'la seule image pleinement rassurante du Nègre' who, through domestication, arrives at the status of the 'barbare domestiqué',¹⁶² the Indochinese *boy* of the colonial era represents the domesticated servant desired as a homosexual partner, yet disavowed as a domestic sexual slave.

While in metropolitan discourse, the homosexual is a source of anxiety because of the 'promiscuous blurring of class lines' caused by his sex- and class-crossing lifestyle,¹⁶³ in the colonial context, anxiety focuses on crossing between races. Unusually, however, it is Torral's homosexuality that is a source of unease concerning the social order from the point of view of the colonial society, not his interracial contacts. For, in Torral's case, the rigid racial boundary is solidly maintained through a gendered political divide: masculine coloniser-ruler versus effeminate colonised-ruled. Two patterns of homosexuality are thus distributed along neat racial lines in tune with colonial ideology, assigning modern homosexual identity to the French and a primitive-cum-pathological homosexual character to the entire Indochinese race.

The Homosexual *Civilisé* as Decadent Parody

Commenting on nineteenth-century neurasthenia, the historian Ann Laura Stoler remarks 'neurasthenia was a major problem in the French empire [...] While in Europe neurasthenia was considered to signal a decadent overload of "modern civilisation" and its high-pitched pace, in the colonies its etiology took the *reverse* form. Colonial neurasthenia was allegedly

¹⁶² 'Bichon chez les Nègres', in Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1970), p. 66.

¹⁶³ Choquette, 'Homosexuals in the City: Representations of Lesbian and Gay Space in Nineteenth-Century Paris', 149-67 (p. 152). As many historians have shown, the link between homosexuality, prostitution and crime was the point of departure for medico-legal discourse on homosexuality in the nineteenth century. These medical concerns gave rise to the increasing visibility of homosexuality in both scientific and popular discourse.

caused by a *distance* from civilisation and European community, and by proximity to the colonised.¹⁶⁴ The same can be said for the wider cultural concept of Decadence that underpins the diagnosis of neurasthenia. Metropolitan Decadence is generally seen as the result of over-civilisation in Europe while *colonial Decadence* affected the morally and physically healthy colonials through intercultural contact with inferior races.

In contrast with this straightforwardly bifurcated concept of Decadence, Torral's homosexual identity appears more problematic in that while he seems to become homosexual only when in the colony, his conversion is total and irreversible. It is in fact asserted as an inherent part of his already decadent, and pathological, identity. The true significance of Farrère's concept of *civilisé* lies in an unusual embrace of the two contradictory strands of Decadence – metropolitan and colonial – with special emphasis on sexual anarchy as embodied particularly in Torral's marginal identity. Monsieur Malais the banker can thus define the *civilisé* as 'la race des anarchistes élégants' (p. 148).

The *civilisé* reflects, in fact, the hybrid identity of a metropolitan *decadent* turned *colonial* at the *fin de siècle*. The new term contributes to the construction of a specific colonial type in tune with the emerging 'psychologie coloniale'. This is reflected in 'a profusion of medical and sociological tracts pinpoint[ing] *the colonial as a distinct and degenerate social type*, with specific psychological and even physical characteristics'.¹⁶⁵ From this perspective, writing in the 1930s, the theorist of colonial literature, Louis Malleret, while criticising *Les Civilisés* for its superficiality and naturalist exaggerations, nonetheless recognises Farrère's contribution to exploring 'l'aspect pathologique de la vie coloniale'.¹⁶⁶

The double articulation of metropolitan and colonial Decadence in the homosexual Torral is to be understood in the context of Farrère's criticism of both the concept of 'civilisation' and its alternative, the decadent renouncement of bourgeois morality and values.

¹⁶⁴ Stoler, 'Making Empire Respectable', 634-60 (p. 646). Emphasis in the text.

¹⁶⁵ Stoler, 'Making Empire Respectable', p. 646. My emphasis.

¹⁶⁶ Malleret, *L'Exotisme indochinois*, pp. 173-4.

The transgressive homosexual seems particularly apt to embody this dual criticism. He unsettles the heterosexual norms underpinning bourgeois values and colonial ideology. Yet, his identity as a perverse homosexual, a pastiche of the widespread stigmatisation of homosexuality and profound homophobia in *fin-de-siècle* France, devalues in advance the nihilistic philosophy he is preaching. Presenting both doctrines as a failure, Farrère seems to suggest that both Decadence and civilisation are conducive to blind faith.¹⁶⁷ They are in fact two sides of the same coin, for Decadence as embodied in the three *civilisés* seems to be the perverse effect of Western modernisation and civilisation, and thus its alter ego.

Farrère's critical stance *vis-à-vis* the concept of civilization (and the civilizing mission along with it) is not a unique case within the French colonial literature of Indochina; it is part of a tradition of 'critical Decadence' inherent in Indochina-inspired fiction as suggested throughout this thesis. In contrast to straightforward colonialist discourse present in more traditional adventure fictions, counter-narrative, or at least critical discourse, *vis-à-vis* colonialist doctrine has thus always been significantly present.

Nonetheless, while Farrère's predecessors such as Boissière and Pouvoirville politicise, in varying degrees, decadent aestheticism as a weapon to destabilise the Western discourse of colonialism and valorise Eastern wisdom and culture, Farrère unabashedly parodies Decadence, dismissing it as ridiculous and absurd.

Decadence's dismissal is played out, particularly at the end of the novel, when French Indochina undergoes geo-political threats posed by both the indigenous revolt within and a fictive British naval attack without. Facing this double threat, Torral as part of the military reserve force, is driven to desertion and exile in Malaysia. His decadent nature, the most consistent of all three, when separated from its aesthetic setting and confronted with 'serious'

¹⁶⁷ Vocabulary related to religion is used by the *civilisés* themselves to characterise their doctrine.

political issues, is revealed to amount only to egotism and cowardice.¹⁶⁸ With Torral, Farrère seems to place Decadence, and homosexuality along with it, in opposition to global and imperial politics, in a way that is attuned with the anti-decadent strand condemning Western degeneracy and calling for regeneration through colonial and military ventures.

In addition to these geo-political threats, Farrère's strategy of downplaying, if not 'de-politicising', Decadence through the figure of the homosexual can be seen in two other major instances. First, as discussed earlier, Farrère realigns the threat of intercultural sexual contact by reasserting the insurmountable racial boundary between coloniser and colonised. Thus, Farrère's white homosexual *civilisé* may be transgressive in terms of gender, but his decadent life has its limitations, for his contact with the native abides by the racial hierarchy prescribed by colonial ideology. Secondly, Farrère's *civilisés*, despite living among the indigenous and their culture, are never transfigured into the 'décivilisés', the mythical figure who crosses the rigid racial and cultural boundary onto the other side.¹⁶⁹ In contrast to De Césade, Boissière's protagonist in 'Une âme. Journal d'un fusillé' discussed in Chapter One, Farrère's rebels never transform Decadence into a means to embrace what Victor Segalen praises as 'Le Divers' in his theory of cultural difference. The novel can thus be said to stage the epistemological and ethical failure of the colonials, including those with marginal sexual identities, *vis-à-vis* sexual, racial and cultural difference.

This resistance to the 'dream of intercultural fusion' is in fact linked with Farrère's deep-rooted adherence to the idea of France's regeneration through colonisation. In a manner reminiscent of the Annamitophile Pouvoirville's trajectory, though with a different attitude towards Indochinese wisdom, after writing *Les Civilisés*, Farrère came to overtly endorse colonialist views that he held for the rest of his life, as discussed in Chapter One.

¹⁶⁸ As opposed to courage, seen as an expression of masculinity, cowardice was believed to be 'the moral expression of "genital" impotence or sexual aberration' at the *fin de siècle* (Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour*, p. 124). Torral's final attitude thus reasserts his inferior homosexual perversion.

¹⁶⁹ Henri Copin, 'Confins et frontières: civilisés et décivilisés en extrême Asie Indochinoise', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 1 (2001), 79-92.

Hence, it is within this perspective of a ‘true’ regeneration that the strategy of displacement of metropolitan concerns onto Saigon, often pointed out by critics, finds its fullest significance.

While this colonialist or anti-decadent reading of *Les Civilisés* is necessarily the dominant reading, we nevertheless cannot overlook the irreducible ambiguity inherent in the novel. Parallel to this reading, which only emerges in retrospect after the end of the novel, *Les Civilisés* can also be read as a decadent novel, not only because it wallows in ‘decadent glamour’¹⁷⁰ for more than half of the story, during which Decadence is valorised as a disruption of metropolitan mores and norms. While the literary devices of parody deployed to undermine Decadence, particularly targeting homosexuality, are also, paradoxically, part of decadent aesthetics.

In addition, although the novel ends with the failure of Decadence marked by Fierce’s and Mévil’s return to ‘barbarian’ life and their deaths, Torral as the ‘true’ *civilisé* is the only one who survives, outlives his comrades and, probably, continues to enjoy his freedom as a ‘homosexual exile’: ‘ce n’est qu’ une vie à refaire’ (p. 338).¹⁷¹ Oscillating between the two competing interpretations of the novel, homosexuality is revealed as relentlessly disruptive of the expectations and demands imposed upon it by society, whether it be a metropolitan or colonial one. Ultimately, the straightforward depoliticisation of Decadence is belied by a more permeating and deep-rooted kind of politics problematised through decadent gender terms.

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¹⁷⁰ Nicola Cooper, ‘Living the Dream? Settler Responses to French Indochina’, *Journal of Romance Studies*, 5 (2005), 79-90 (p. 88). Cooper seems to dismiss this equivocal potential of the novel’s Decadence by solely focusing on its criticism of imperial ideology.

¹⁷¹ While away on duty far from his fiancée, the innocent Sélysette, Fierce succumbs to his previous vices and is surprised by her at the Inspection in the arms of two women. Sunken into despair and regrets, he then ends up sacrificing his life in a heroic battle against the British navy to protect French Indochina. Meanwhile, Mévil is consumed by his desire for two French women whom he cannot possess and dies in an accident, possibly a suicide, when his bicycle crashes into the carriage of one of the women.

The reappropriation of the trope of colonial effeminacy by Pouvoirville and Farrère reveals its fullest historical significance when considered from the perspective of the history of queer and homoerotic French literature at the *fin de siècle*. Alongside the familiar cliché of the effeminate homosexual or ‘hommes-femmes’ ubiquitous in many fictions of the time, the period sees an emerging alternative discourse on male homoeroticism that moves away from the medical discourse on the effeminate homosexual, notably in the writings of their contemporary André Gide (1869-1951).¹⁷² Drawing on the Classical model of ‘éphèbes physiquement virils’, Gidian homosexuality advocates the exclusion of effeminacy from homosexual relations and valorises the figure of the ‘virile homosexual’ and ‘camaraderie virile’ against the backdrop of both colonial North Africa and metropolitan France, often at the expense of effeminate homosexuality.¹⁷³ Pouvoirville’s effeminate indigenous warrior and Farrère’s virile homosexual coloniser can thus be seen as participating in a general redefinition of modern masculinity. It is notably through intercultural contact via colonialism that metropolitan concepts of masculinity and homosexuality were problematised, redefined and opened up to new possibilities since the coloniser’s identity, through his masculinity, is put on trial in the colonial context.

* * *

¹⁷² Particularly the play *Saül*, written in 1896-7, published in 1903 and first staged only in 1922, and the essay *Corydon*, distributed in private circles between 1911-20 and printed for the wider public in 1924.

¹⁷³ For further studies on Gide and homosexuality, see Lucey, *Gide’s Bent: Sexuality, Politics, Writing*, Lawrence R. Schehr, *Alcibiades at the Door: Gay Discourses in French Literature* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 113-54, and Wallace Fowle, ‘Sexuality in Gide’s Self-Portrait’, in Elaine Marks and George Stambolian, *Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts, Critical Texts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 243-61.

Chapter Three

Le Néant oriental

Far Eastern Spirituality and The Allure of Ruins

In his brief reflection on what the ‘génération décadente’ of the 1880s contributed, enduringly, to the French *fin-de-siècle* literary landscape, Michel Winock restates a widely accepted view of decadent aesthetics as ‘l’expression du dégoût pour l’époque, la fuite dans le mysticisme, les paradis artificiels, l’occultisme, voire le satanisme, l’attrait de la Mort et du Néant’ (p. 19). This perhaps overly simplistic view of Decadence’s triple fascination with artificiality, mysticism and morbidity alludes to three aesthetic and ideological influences that played a significant role in the construction of the decadent imaginary, namely Baudelairianism, Schopenhaurianism and esotericism. The last two of these in particular are apparent in the subject of the present chapter which will explore what we might call ‘néant’. The *néant* – and the related ideas of void, nothingness, the abyss and ‘anéantissement’ – will be examined in its two interconnected aspects, the spiritual *néant* and the cultural, or archaeological, *néant*.

In French colonial literature of Indochina, the spiritual *néant* is primarily articulated through the appeal of Buddhism and wider Far Eastern spirituality while the cultural *néant* can be found in the allure of the archaeological ruins of Angkor – a vast complex of temples forming the capital city of the Khmer Empire located in the present-day Cambodia. More

than in any other decadent trope, it is in the *néant* that the contradictory desires for Decadence and regeneration are articulated from the outset in the most evident and problematic manner.

In contrast to opium and sexuality, Asian spirituality and the ancient ruins of Indochina were in fact acknowledged and valorised throughout the nineteenth century, owing to what Raymond Schwab terms the ‘Renaissance orientale’. This refers to the ‘discovery’ of Indian, and Far Eastern, ancient languages and wisdom by the West which proved to have profound implications in the self-(re)fashioning of European identities. This undeniable valorisation of Indochinese civilisations seems to enter into conflict with the colonialist discourse that cast the colonised as culturally inferior. The French authors’ approaches to the Indochinese *néant* are thus mapped out along this ambivalent attitude in a truly heterogenous way, from the wholehearted adoption of decadent aesthetics to a more ethnological representation of the allure of the *néant* which, nevertheless, remains rooted in cultural Decadence. These various attitudes reflect the epistemic anxiety into which the Indochinese *néant* plunged these authors, forcing them to re-examine the diffusionist model of cultural transmission which underlines the civilising mission on one hand, and on the other, to think about the many ways in which these newly attractive yet radically foreign elements could be incorporated into the ‘Greater France’. This deliberate attempt at cultural syncretism also heralds the decline of Decadence in the colonial literature of Indochina after the turn of the century: a movement towards a more ‘objective’ and ‘truthful’ version of colonial literature was advocated from around the 1910s.

For metropolitan writers, the attraction to the *néant* in the form of erotic religiosity stems, on one hand, from the perverse pairing of Sadism with the Christian tradition inherited by the Decadents from the Romantic generation.¹ On the other hand, the vogue for Schopenhauer’s philosophy and the general sentiment of pessimism *vis-à-vis* modernity

¹ Mario Praz, quoting Sainte-Beuve’s characterisation of decadent literature as an oscillation between the two poles of Sadism and Catholicism, sees religious expressions in such writing as a ‘disguised form of morbid satisfaction: repentance may be nothing more than a mask of algolagnia’ (*The Romantic Agony*, p. 321).

that such philosophy fuels play an even more significant role in the popular rise of the term *néant* at the *fin de siècle*.² However, the decadent ‘Néant’ with a capital letter, as in Winock’s quote, must be understood in the *fin-de-siècle* cultural context within which Western nihilism encountered the ‘néant oriental’.³

In tune with the vogue for Schopenhaurian nihilism,⁴ the French writers of colonial literature of Indochina constructed Indochina first and foremost as a *spiritually* decadent land. This representation of Indochina as the land of *néant* arises as much from their direct unsettling experience with Indochinese spiritual practices (unsettling because they combined pagan animism with Buddhism and Taoism, as we shall see) as from their engagement with on-going metropolitan discussions on spiritual matters.

Alongside Buddhism,⁵ the emerging scholarly concept of ‘world religion’ as well as the esoteric subculture known as the ‘occult revival’ that took place in France and the wider Western world at the turn of the century will be mobilised in my close reading to shed light on the multifaceted representation of the *néant* that pervades colonial literature.⁶ Curiously

² Schopenhauer’s writings started to be translated and published first in journals in the late 1850s and as monographs in the late 1870s after his death in 1860. In France, the reception of his works has a specific chronology coinciding with Wagnerism and the first popularisation of Nietzsche’s thoughts. See Victor Hell, ‘Schopenhauer et le mouvement décadent en France’, in *L’Esprit de décadence*, 2 vols (Paris: Minard, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 223-34.

³ The ‘néant oriental’ is Nietzsche’s definition of ‘nirvâna’, the ultimate goal of Buddhist doctrine which was seen by Nietzsche as more profoundly pessimistic than Schopenhauer’s philosophy (*Œuvres philosophiques complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), vol 11, p. 303, quoted in Droit, *Le Culte du néant*, p. 38).

⁴ Schopenhauer’s philosophy has a direct link, although retrospectively, with Buddhism in such a manner that the two came to be seen as equivalent at the *fin de siècle* (Droit, *Le Culte du néant*, p. 137). Schopenhauer was recast as ‘un bouddhiste contemporain en Allemagne’ by Paul Challemeil-Lacour in his article ‘Un bouddhiste contemporain en Allemagne’ (*Revue des Deux Mondes* (15 March 1870), 296-332). The term ‘Schopenhaurianism’ used in this thesis refers to the *fin-de-siècle* understanding of Schopenhauer’s philosophy as a ‘théorie de la souffrance et du néant’, celebrating ‘l’absolu détachement’, ‘l’anéantissement de la volonté’ (p. 332 and 299), i.e. a total renouncement of life and existence.

⁵ Within the ‘Renaissance orientale’ in Europe, Buddhism not only sparks interest among scholars and social commentators of the time (such as Ernest Renan, Hippolyte Taine, Gobineau, as well as the controversial Nordau), but also ignites the imagination of the general public, fuelled by vulgarising monographs and articles on the topic. There have been many studies of nineteenth-century scholarly writings on Buddhism as well as Buddhist influence on English and European literature. However, popular and vulgarising texts about Buddhism are a relatively neglected area.

⁶ Scholarship on world religions and comparative religion rarely addresses their connection to the esoteric revival at the *fin de siècle*, and *vice versa*. For instance, Tomoko Masuzawa’s informative article on the genealogy of the concept of world religions mentions the occult revival only in passing (‘World Religions’, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), pp. 9800-04 (p. 19)). The main reason is probably that the world religions concept is considered a ‘scholarly’ subject while the occult revival is seen as a cultural phenomenon that existed outside, although parallel to, the development of the world religions

enough, previous scholarship on the French colonial literature of Indochina, while mentioning the ‘spiritual quest’ of the French authors as one of the important motifs of this corpus, has failed to identify its link with this *fin-de-siècle* transnational movement. This is all the more surprising, given how fascination with occultism left deep-rooted marks in European avant-garde literary and artistic movements.

Overlapping with the spiritual *néant*, the famous archaeological ruins of Angkor representing the cultural *néant* play out a dialectical trajectory from the *néant* to *anéantissement* with regeneration as the ultimate aim. The ruins are understood within a double articulation of cultural Decadence which centres around the rise and fall of civilisations on one hand, and, on the other hand, the racialist theory that ‘aryanises’ ancient Indochinese civilisations against which its modern versions are measured. In contrast, the French cultural and scientific actions at Angkor enable a regenerative anti-decadent discourse to be mapped onto the ruins. This is translated, literarily, into the imaginative rewriting of world history, with Angkor and French colonisation playing an important part, and, ideologically, in the implicit articulation of France’s imperial identity which incorporates Indochinese cultural heritage into its own cultural and racial boundaries.

THE SPIRITUAL NÉANT FROM THE BUDDHA’S IRONIC SMILE TO THE DREAM OF SYNCRETISM

In his essay *Le Culte du néant: les philosophes et le Bouddha*, Roger-Pol Droit examines the historical development of the ways in which Buddha and his doctrine, Buddhism, a neologism,⁷ were received by nineteenth-century European philosophers. In contrast to the

concept. Occultism or esotericism are hence the objects of study in the field of cultural studies rather than religious studies. One of the few studies of the connection between the occult, world religions and colonisation is Jeremy Jammes and David A. Palmer, ‘Occulting the Dao: Daoist Inner Alchemy, French Spiritism, and Vietnamese Colonial Modernity in Caodai Translingual Practice’, *The Journal Of Asian Studies*, 77 (2018), 405-28. ⁷ ‘In early modern times, then, there was no “Buddhism” to consolidate disparate observations gathered in and about Asia’ (Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 122). Richard King quoting Philip Almond dates the earliest reference to a recognisable group known as ‘Buddhists’ to 1827, around the same time as its sibling ‘Hinduism’ (*Orientalism and Religion*, p. 143). See also Peter Bishop, *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism and the Western Imagination* (London: Athlone Press, 1993), p. 17 and 91.

West's continuing knowledge of Arabo-Islamic sources, there was no continuity concerning European knowledge of Buddhism.⁸ The 1820s-30s saw the 'discovery' of the 'fait bouddhique' and the emergence in the West of a new field of study called 'Buddhology'.⁹ Within a climate marked by nihilism and pessimism, Buddhism came to be seen as the 'culte du néant', 'établissant une sorte de lien obligé entre la doctrine supposée du Bouddha et la thématique de l'anéantissement'.¹⁰ Known only to a limited extent, this transnational religion with its Indian roots was categorically rejected as the 'Église du nihilisme' (Barthélémy Saint-Hilaire and Ernest Renan). Outside scholarly circles, Buddhist doctrine was viewed even more as a menace, an evil principle due to what was seen as its apology for nihilism and its apparent atheism.¹¹

Anxiety about Buddhism was exacerbated by the discovery that adherents to Buddha's dharma around the world were outnumbering Christians. That Buddha – called Gautama, Siddhartha or Shakyamuni – was actually a historical figure who lived long before Jesus Christ (approximately between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE) and whose teachings had been widely followed since his lifetime then only increased this fear. Hence 'the thorny issue of the possible influence of Buddhism upon Christianity' arose. It called for a reconceptualisation of Christianity as one among many world religions and a radical reconsideration of Europe's position in world history.¹²

However, from 1885 onwards, this threatening view of Buddhism was replaced by the rise of 'neo-Buddhism'. Characterised by eclecticism and syncretism, neo-Buddhism represents Buddha as a melancholic and saturnine sage, assuaging the terror caused by the

⁸ Droit, *Le Culte du néant*, p. 29.

⁹ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, pp. 143-60. This view concerning a late discovery of Buddhism was already established at the time by Ernest Renan (1823-92) in *Nouvelles études d'histoire religieuse*, asserting that 'Le bouddhisme est bien réellement une découverte de notre siècle' (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1884), pp. 41-47).

¹⁰ Droit, p. 92. The term 'le culte du néant' was coined by Victor Cousin following Hegel's interpretation of Buddha's doctrine (p. 123).

¹¹ Buddha was called by Renan the 'Christ athée de l'Inde' (*Nouvelles études d'histoire religieuse*, p. 49)

¹² Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, pp. 141-3.

menace of the *néant*. He is thus conflated with the familiar Western image of ‘sages à l’humeur noire, contemplant silencieux, d’un air sombre, les vanités humaines’.¹³ The reason for this shift is not systematically examined by Droit. Drawing on studies of world religions and Orientalism, I wish to argue that it can be linked to the ways in which the West manages to re-appropriate and reintegrate Buddhism into Europe’s past (and hence future) through the process of the ‘aryanisation’ of Buddhism.

As a result of the philological classification in which Indo-European languages (associated with an ‘Aryan’ race) were distinguished from others, including Semitic language, Buddhism came to be considered as having the same ‘origin’ as Christianity, namely Aryan, hence having a close religious and ‘racial’ relationship with Europe’s identity. Due to this perceived ancient affinity with Europe and the influence of occult syncretism, Buddhism no longer represented a hostile ‘counter-invasion’ of the West by the East,¹⁴ but rather, a reinvigorating element. In other words, Buddhism which had started out as an alter ego of European Decadence, came to be seen as an ‘anti-decadent’ force.

While Droit’s exposé offers a clear chronology highlighting a historical transition from the terror of the ‘culte du néant’ to the more reassuring image of Oriental ‘sagesse’ in nineteenth-century philosophical and cultural discourses, the same clear shift is not evident in *fin-de-siècle* literary texts of Indochina. In these texts, the two successive views of Buddhism seem to overlap at least in the early phase (1880s-1890s), for Buddhism appears to be ambivalently represented as decadent and anti-decadent at the same time. I shall examine the decadent imaginary of Buddha within a set of primary texts which represent Buddhism’s spiritual leader as either a decorative *bibelot* or the embodiment of the menacing *néant* itself. As the fascination of occultist syncretism gained favour among decadent artists, the dream

¹³ Droit, p. 214.

¹⁴ Spiritual ‘counter-invasion’ refers to the debates inspired by Buddhism in Great Britain and the resulting engagement with Asian culture that shaped Victorian identity. The same fear can also be said to pervade Western Europe generally. See J. Jeffrey Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

of a fusion of cultures and identities began to exert its influence on the representation of Buddhism, pushing it towards the neo-Buddhist vein. The poetry of Jules Boissière, Alfred Droin and Albert de Pouvourville stand out as exemplars of this neo-Buddhist tendency for writings in this period to range between iconoclastic attitudes to the depoliticisation of Far Eastern spirituality.

The Ambivalent Buddha

Integral to the nineteenth-century discovery of Buddhism is the place of the exotic Buddha from the Far East among the bibelotic collections of French dilettantes. ‘Une poétique de bibelot’ forms a significant part of decadent culture in literature as well as in interior decoration.¹⁵ During the period of Buddha’s vogue, Schopenhauer acquired a statue of Buddha in the mid-1800s, and, at the turn of the century, Auguste Rodin collected statues of Buddha in his Meudon studio at the turn of the century, Rainer Maria Rilke (inspired by his visit to Rodin’s studio) wrote three poems on Buddha, and Odilon Redon produced a series of paintings and lithographs entitled *Buddha*.¹⁶

The arrival of Buddhist artefacts from the colonies particularly through archaeological excavations of the ancient Khmer city of Angkor in Indochina, contributed to an unprecedented visibility of Buddhist historical materials in the *métropole*. At the turn of the century, museums such as the *Musée indochinois* and *Musée Guimet* as well as Buddhist temples showcased in the Indochinese pavilions in colonial and world exhibitions partake of this phenomenon.¹⁷

¹⁵ Sam Bootle, ‘Bibelotic Buddhas: Decadence and its critique’, paper presented at the conference *Exoticism, Colonialism and Decadence around the fin de siècle* (University of Oxford, 25-26 September 2018). Forthcoming in an edited volume, *French Decadence in Global Context: Colonialism and Exoticism*.

¹⁶ Rodin procured five plaster casts of the Buddha of Borobudur from the *Exposition universelle* in 1900. See Garnier Bénédicte, ‘Vivante immobilité, une collection de gestes antiques’, in Katia Légeret-Manochhaya, *Rodin et la danse de Çiva* (Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2014), pp. 133-50. Rilke’s three poems were published in the two parts of *Neue Gedichte* in 1907 and 1908.

¹⁷ The *Musée indochinois* at the Palais de Trocadéro was founded in 1889 with the explorer Louis Delaporte’s collection of Khmer art while the *Musée des religions* started to showcase Émile Guimet’s (1836-1918) collection in Lyon from 1879. Moving its collection from Lyon to Paris, the *Musée Guimet* was founded in 1889 and was dedicated primarily to ‘religious objects of Asian origin, and especially from India and Indochina’. (Penny

In the literary world, the metropolitan short story by the *académicien* Jules Clarétie, *Bouddha* (1888), encapsulates this decadent imaginary concerning the bibelotic Buddha, although his stance seems to be critical of Decadence.¹⁸ The journey to retrieve the coveted Buddha of Tonkin reveals the colonial violence and violation that need to be undertaken by the French dilettante colonial officer (the paradoxical figure that heralds Boissière's decadent protagonist in 'Une âme. Journal d'un fusillé' examined in Chapter One) in its original geographical and cultural context in order to get hold of this religious icon before turning it into a commodity back in the *métropole*.

While representing a potential *bibelot*, Buddha is at the same time perceived as an ambivalent figure, at once clement and cruel, overseeing the barbaric and bloody 'pacification' war: 'Et Bouddha, le grand Bouddha doré, souriait à ces flancs de sangs et contemplait ces morts avec son rictus impenetrable sur ses lèvres pour l'éternité' (p. 64). This ironic smile takes on true decadent features in the colonial literature of Indochina in which Buddha comes to represent a perverse and eroticised doctrine of quietism paradoxically infused with violence and cruelty.

In a poem by Jules Boissière mentioned briefly in Chapter Two, 'La con-gai',¹⁹ the Buddha's ironic smile is articulated through the metropolitan cultural politics and literary

Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai Press, 2007), p. 130.) It incorporated the collection of the *Musée indochinois* in 1927. In his amusing account of the Buddhist ceremony performed by a Japanese monk which took place at the Musée Guimet in 1893, Jules Bois depicts the room as 'encombrée de Bouddhas aux étranges attitudes figées dans la contemplation' (*Les Petites religions de Paris* (Paris: Léon Chailley, 1894), p. 69). For the *Expositions Universelles* in Paris, a hall was dedicated to the religions of the Far East in 1878. In 1889, a Buddhist temple, 'La Pagode de grande tranquillité', was erected in the Indochinese pavilion (Deyasi, 'Indochina, "Greater France" and the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris: Angkor Wat in Blue, White and Red', 123-41 (p. 129)). I shall return to these museological actions in the Angkor Wat section.

¹⁸ Jules Clarétie, *Bouddha* (Paris: L. Conquet, 1888). The actress Antonia who stars in the opera *Bouddha* is offered a golden statue of Buddha by her lover, the protagonist Edmond de Laurière, a French officer in colonial Algerian troupe. During an argument, she breaks it. Edmond sets off to fight in Tonkin and vows to acquire her a new example. Back from bloody experiences of war, he brings her a new statue only to find out that she rejects both him and her old taste for orientalism.

¹⁹ For the entire poem, see Annex 2. The poem was published in *Le Lan*, *Essai sur la littérature coloniale*. According to *Le Lan*, this 'inédite' poetic piece was written twenty years earlier, around 1887 (p. 16). René Crayssac reproduced it again in 1912 in his study of Boissière, 'Essai sur la vie et œuvre de Jules Boissière', in *Les Pages indochinoises*, no. 3 (1 October 1912), p. 45. At the same moment, *La Plume indochinoise, revue littéraire et artistique* (no. 6, 1 October 1912) published in Hanoi a special issue dedicated to the memory of Jules Boissière in which

aesthetics of the time, namely art for art's sake and Symbolism. This aesthetic engagement reveals the role Far Eastern spirituality plays in the relationship between mysticism and Decadence in general, reminiscent of the role Buddhism played in the articulation of Western nihilism in philosophy as already mentioned.

In this eight-stanza poem, written in alexandrines, Buddhism is associated with a female prostitute in an opium den-brothel, demonstrating an interplay between opium, perverse sexuality and decadent aesthetics. It is also seen as one component among a wider eclectic Indochinese spirituality.²⁰ The poet captures the moment when he is lying with his Indochinese concubine who prepares his opium while they erotically caress one another. After a description of the *congaï*'s physique as an exotic *femme fatale* with androgynous legs (line 10)²¹ and his decadent 'amour' for her (line 40), he brings the last two stanzas to an end in an atmosphere of mysticism:

À l'heure vespérale où ma lampe s'allume,
Douce, silencieuse, esclave du lettré,
45 Tu ne tardes jamais à relever ma plume,
Tu ne déplaces pas le bouquin préféré:
O fille de l'Annam, tu respectes le Livre,
Et ton œil de mystique est satisfait de suivre
Les caractères saints sur le papier sacré.

50 Salut, fille aux yeux noirs de race inférieure,
Idéal féminin, toi qui n'exaltes pas,
Puisque je te choisis, ma part est la meilleure,
J'oublierai les catins d'Europe dans tes bras ; -
Et dans ma quiétude, obstiné volontaire,
55 Je t'aurai, sans vouloir déchiffrer ton mystère,
Pas plus que l'ironie aux lèvres des Bouddhas.²²

the poem 'La Con-gaï' featured (pp. 93-4) alongside essays by Jean Ajalbert and Albert Maybon and excerpts from Boissière's other texts.

²⁰ Indochinese spirituality as it is represented in the colonial literature of Indochina in general usually offers an eclectic image that combines Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism as well as pagan animism and divination. Hinduism may also be present, but it is generally discussed in association with the ruins of ancient civilizations in Cambodia and Cochinchina, see our analysis of the allure of ruins.

²¹ That the trope of androgyny is mapped onto the Indochinese woman, and not the man, is quite unusual but not completely new. This is attuned with the isomorphism associated with the Indochinese people regardless their sex as examined in Chapter Two.

²² Le Lan, *Essai sur le littérature coloniale*, p. 17.

This ‘fille d’Annam’ of ‘race inférieure’ is transformed from being a slave to the poet’s carnal desire (‘Ta chair fraîche d’esclave’, line 1) into a sort of intellectual slave (‘esclave du lettré’) and finally into a mystic. Associating the interracial sexual acts (expressed crudely in ‘Je t’aurai’) and opiate intoxication with Far Eastern spirituality,²³ the end of the poem compellingly introduces a Far Eastern esoteric tonality to the decadent trope of the mystical *femme fatale*.

The native sphinx-like *femme fatale* (‘Sphynx impassible’, line 37) is thus compared with the statue of Buddha; her (racial) mystery with his ironic (spiritual) smile. Race and spirituality are mapped onto each other to foreground the trope of the mysterious other. Both are fetishised in such a way that, along with the sphere they are associated with – sexual and spiritual –, they become interchangeable. In other words, the native woman is spiritualised in the same way that the Buddha is feminised, in parallel with the occidental tendency to feminise Eastern culture, and Eastern spirituality along with it. To enhance this decadent imaginary, religious expressions like ‘à l’heure vespérale’, ‘salut’ (which can be understood in the religious sense of ‘salvation’), ‘mystique’, ‘mystère’ are provocatively placed at the same level as those that remind the reader of the transactional nature of this sexual exchange.

What links the sexual setting to the mystical realm is the highly intellectual, aesthetic and esoteric character associated with Buddhism and Far Eastern spirituality in general. This is embodied in the presence of ‘Le Livre’ (line 47) and the sacred characters (line 49), initiating a shift in focus, from Christian mysticism to Asian spiritual traditions, though insight into the tradition of the mystical ‘Livre’ is, it is implied, only accessible to the poet,

²³ While contributing to the image of perverse Buddhism, opium is seen as a positive medium that can aid the smoker on a spiritual quest, rendered here in line 54 ‘dans ma quiétude’. As A.-J. Rapin notes, ‘Chez Boissière, Pouvourville, Laloy et, dans une moindre mesure, Magre, l’art de fumer reste indissociable d’une quête spirituelle qui les pousse à chercher dans la pensée “traditionnelle” de l’Asie une voie initiatique’ (‘La “divine drogue”’, 6-31 (p. 28).

and not to the woman.²⁴ In Indochinese colonial literature, both native and European protagonists are often shown to be engaging in the intellectual-cum-spiritual activities, such as meditating on Far Eastern teaching through sacred scriptures and contemplating classical Chinese characters.²⁵ Calligraphic characters on paper or luxurious silk fabric are often hung from the ceiling or on the wall as part of the décor of a temple or a mandarin's mansion.

The ways in which the poet and the Buddha-like Indochinese woman engage with the sacred text can be read as reflections of how decadent aesthetics, as played out in the colonial literature of Indochina, engages with metropolitan theories of poetry and arts, that is the *fin-de-siècle* 'poetic revolution'. Their erotico-esoteric interaction also illustrates the role of Far Eastern spirituality in the literary and esoteric renewal in France.

The poet's attitude towards the Buddha-like woman mirrors her attitude towards the sacred texts. The poet is content with the physical possession of her ambiguous decadent body without the need to 'decipher' its racial and spiritual mystery. At once repulsive and attractive, her androgynous body is depicted in formalist terms (her legs 'à la ligne si pure', line 10) encrusted with exotic jewels (ivory, jade, gold, amber, crystal) in tune with the Parnassian and decadent predilection for hieratic poses and bejewelled female bodies.²⁶ In the same manner, instead of reading 'Les caractères saints sur le papier sacré' (line 49) in search of a meaning, the native woman is content ('et ton œil de mystique est satisfait', line 48) with their material and formal aspects. Both seem to embody an aesthetic experience that

²⁴ While Taoism can be linked to a specific 'Book', such as the *Tao Te Ching*, the idea of the Book as authority – in the same way as the Bible or Koran – is at odds with Buddhism, within which there exist several traditions and scriptures. The Pali-text, *Tripitaka*, is however considered the sacred canon of one of the two main traditions, the Theravada tradition. This tradition is influential in Sri Lanka and most Southeast Asian countries. The Mahayana tradition which is popular in Tibet, China, Japan and Vietnam, tends to hold Tripitaka to be of equal importance as other scriptures in Tibetan, Chinese and Sanskrit.

²⁵ Indochinese spirituality has distinct Chinese roots: before the French colonisation, Indochina had long been dominated by imperial China (from 111 BC to 939 AD), then remained a tributary to it both culturally and administratively, with various degrees of influences and dependency. At the turn of the century, the *Hàn* or *Nho* script written in Classical Chinese characters with Vietnamese pronunciation was still the main language in which religious and royal texts were read and written. See 'Vietnam', in *Dictionnaire mondial des littératures*, ed. by Pascal Mougin and Karen Haddad-Wotling (Paris: Larousse, 2002), pp. 1291-95.

²⁶ Although Decadence, and the ensuing Symbolism, are often seen as reactions against the Parnassian formalism, there is in fact a continuity in terms of themes and aesthetics between the two periods. See Jean-Nicolas Illouz, *Le Symbolisme* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2004), pp. 17-39.

echoes Gautier's poetic theory developed in 'Émaux et camées' (1852). Turning artefacts into aesthetic objects in and for themselves, Gautier removes from them any possibility of worldly meaning and thus valorises aestheticism and formalism as the objective of poetry and arts.²⁷

It is the well-known theme of the 'unknowable other' and its correlative *topos* of 'epistemological failure' in the colonial context that allow the *fin-de-siècle* theory of poetry to be deployed.²⁸ However, in contrast with the classic narrative scheme consisting of an attempt at intercultural contact followed by its failure, such as we have seen for example in Myriam Harry's *Petites épouses* (1904) discussed in Chapter Two, Boissière's poet deliberately refuses to decipher his native mistress (line 55). This deliberate refusal can partly be seen as conformity to one of the conclusions often drawn in exotic and colonial literature, namely, the idea that there might be no meaning to decipher at all.²⁹

Nevertheless, Boissière's final lines seem to represent a move beyond this 'stereotype' of colonial impenetrability. Reading the poem against the backdrop of the emerging Symbolist movement suggests that there might actually be 'something' behind the aestheticised surface, particularly behind the Buddha's lips, the final image of the poem. Strikingly, for the avant-garde 'initiates', the terms 'le Livre' suggests the theory of poetry elaborated by the visionary poet Stéphane Mallarmé which can partly be seen as a continuation of Gautier's doctrine of art for art's sake. Both reacting against and picking up on the formalist doctrines of the Parnassians, these *fin-de-siècle* writers embraced the Neoplatonic, abstract and universal concept of the 'Absolu' apparently in line with the

²⁷ The trope of jewels associated with Far Eastern spirituality is also present in Albert de Pouvourville's poetry, particularly in 'Pierres rares', a poem dedicated to Claude Farrère (*Rimes d'Asie*, pp. 53-4.) Depicting the ornamental luxury of an Indochinese temple in detail, the poem ends on an esoteric note evoking the secret doctrine hidden in this temple: 'Ainsi la Science luit dans l'ombre du Symbole'. If the influence of Gautier's *Émaux et camées* is pervasive, aestheticism is nevertheless reoriented to embrace a conspicuously spiritual tone which draws the poem closer to Symbolism.

²⁸ For an analysis of the *topos* of the impenetrability of the native woman and her metonymic function representing the mystery of an entire Indochinese race, see Chapter Two.

²⁹ Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* is often quoted as a model of this plot: 'on pénètre un peu dans ces âmes et on n'y trouve rien'. Pierre Citti sketches out various scenarios provoked by an encounter with 'une âme impénétrable' in French colonial and exotic literature (*Contre la décadence*, p. 248). See also Yee, *The Colonial Comedy*, p. 202.

German philosophy of Idealism that had captured the imagination of the earlier Romantics: ‘l’Absolu seul compte et l’art est la voie d’accès vers le monde idéal’.³⁰ Although rejecting a pure adherence to Platonism, Mallarmé promotes the idea that Art can reveal suggestively, the ideal world which lies behind transitory appearances. From a pure aesthetic experience, poetry becomes the locus of tension between revelation and dissimulation of the ‘Idée’ behind the ‘Symbole’,³¹ between spelling out the meaning and sustaining the aesthetics of the opaque in search of the superior truth.

Against the dominant positivism and scientism of the period, the *fin-de-siècle* Symbolist theory of poetry and arts can be seen as a movement that integrates the ‘spiritual’ for literature and the arts. In his 1884 letter, Mallarmé writes about the articulation of the ‘sens mystérieux des aspects de l’existence’ as Poetry’s ‘seule tâche spirituelle’.³² In contrast with the earlier Romantic generation, this spiritual strand in Symbolism is more often than not seen as having an ‘esoteric’ or ‘occulted’ root. Arguably, this idea of the ‘hidden’ or ‘veiled’ meaning of the symbol thus has a strong connection with the ‘occult revival’ which took place in Europe (mainly in France, England and Germany) and America from the mid-nineteenth century until its peak at the turn of the century.³³ The personal relationships and exchange of ideas between avant-garde artistic circles and the active leaders of the esoteric

³⁰ Brix, ‘L’Idéalisme fin-de-siècle’, 141-54 (p. 142). On the ‘renaissance’ of Idealism at the *fin-de-siècle*, see Sandrine Schiano-Bennis, *La Renaissance de l’idéalisme à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999).

³¹ The Symbolist concepts of Idea and Symbol are multifarious, fluid and varying from author to author. For a brief discussion of these terms see Illouz, *Le Symbolisme*, pp. 58-59. André Gide, for example, in his *Traité du Narcisse* (1891) considered a manifest of Symbolism, defines the poet’s task as giving a ‘véritable’ form to the Idea through the use of symbols (*Romans. Récits et sotties. Œuvres lyriques* (Paris: Gallimard ‘la Pléiade’, 1958), pp. 9-10).

³² “‘La Poésie est l’expression, par le langage humain ramené à son rythme essentiel, du sens mystérieux des aspects de l’existence: elle doue ainsi d’authenticité notre séjour et constitue la seule tâche spirituelle.’” (Letter to Léo d’Orfer in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), vol. 1, p. 782).

³³ Scholars tend to agree that the terms ‘esoteric’ and ‘occult’ were interchangeable at the *fin-de-siècle*. See *Western Esotericism: A Concise History*, trans. by Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), Jennifer Walters, ‘Magical Revival: Occultism and the Culture of Regeneration in Britain, c 1880-1929’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Stirling, 2007), David Allen Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism and Politics in Modern France* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000), and *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

revival infers the influence of this new cultural phenomenon on the artistic imaginary and its expressions.³⁴

Alongside elements from Western traditions – mostly from Christian mysticism, Jewish Kabbala, Renaissance Hermeticism, alchemy and ritual magic –, Eastern religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism, played a major role in this spiritual revival, specifically through the influential Theosophical movement. Broadly speaking, many esoteric thinkers were convinced that ‘all of the world’s religions and philosophical traditions were reflections of a universal truth’.³⁵ From this esoteric perspective, the ‘mystère’ behind the aestheticised surface of the decadent female Bouddha’s ironic smile might be an occulted truth awaiting to be revealed.

The decadent fascination with ancient scriptures and exotico-esoteric calligraphy³⁶ deployed in Boissière’s poem can thus be best understood within this multi-layered articulation that draws on the Symbolist ideal and the cultural form of the esoteric revival, as well as the scholarly framework of ‘world religions’, which focuses on the textual reconstruction of classical Buddhism. In valorising the idealised ‘pure’ Buddhism based on texts rather than the actual and living Buddhism, this Orientalist discourse seems to fit in perfectly with the decadent project that celebrates the pairing of intellectualism with aestheticism.³⁷

³⁴ The writers most cited as instances of this connection are J.-K. Huysmans, Jules Bois, Joséphin Péladan and Paul Adam. For the visual arts, the most cited painters are Odilon Redon, Paul Ranson and Maurice Denis. On the connection between the occult circle and avant-garde writers and artists, see Deyasi, ‘French Visual Culture and ‘Indochina’’, John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 233, Robert Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and Winock, *Décadence fin de siècle*.

³⁵ Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, p. 10.

³⁶ Huysman’s hero is also fascinated with the ‘surprenant calligraphe, en lettres onciales, coloriées, relevées, comme celles des vieux manuscrits, de points d’or’ (p. 287) with which the title *Quelques vers de Mallarmé* is rendered. This attitude also echoes the *congaï*’s respectful attitude towards ‘Les caractères saints sur le papier sacré’ (line 49) in Boissière’s poem.

³⁷ On the reconstruction and vivification of a literate and textualist Buddhism within the concept of world religions, see also King, *Orientalism and Religion*, p. 148.

What I seek to argue is that within this specific historical moment of the turn of the century when influences from Parnassian, decadent and emerging Symbolist aesthetics intermingled and interacted with the revival of spiritual sentiments, Boissière carved out a space for a colonial Indochinese spirituality at the interplay between exoticism, eroticism, esotericism, and Decadence. By the same token, his poem also illustrates the ways in which Decadence's (and Symbolism's) fascination for mysticism and spirituality are partly shaped by, if not rooted in, the French domination of extra-European lands and the Western construction of knowledge about these lands.

Boissière's mysterious *congai* has also other possible echoes. In the Buddhist tradition, there exists a female Buddhisattva which intrigued many French authors, namely *Quang-An*, sometimes transcribed as *Quang-Am* or *Koung-An* (in modern transcriptions, *Quan Âm* in Vietnamese or *Guanyin Bhodhisattva* in Chinese).³⁸ Widely revered as a popular deity, she often sits as the main 'Goddess' on the altar in pagodas in different forms. Despite her frequent presence in colonial literature, surprisingly, no scholarship has examined the significance of this figure.

In a collection of poetry written in 'faux sonnet' (a verse is inserted in the middle of the poem between the two quatrains and the two tercets), *Rimes d'Asie* (1912), Albert de Pouvourville dedicates a poem 'La Déesse' to this female Buddhist icon.³⁹ In tune with decadent aesthetics, the poet sexualises the statue of Quang-Am paradoxically as an 'Androgyne muet et blanc' (line 1). Her 'muteness' is articulated through the trope of mystery ('Énigme de métal', line 10). Her whiteness embodies her 'virginité' (line 13) which implicitly

³⁸ *Guanyin Bhodhisattva* is part of Mahayana Buddhism, which emphasises the figure of *Bhodhisattva*, who, with wisdom and compassion, strives for the salvation and well-being of all sentient beings.

³⁹ Pouvourville, *Rimes d'Asie*, pp. 93-4. For the entire poem, see Annex 4.

links her to the Virgin Mary in Christian tradition as well the sterility of Salomé, yet her indolence is reminiscent of the dangerous *femme fatale*.⁴⁰

She is at once male and female: ‘dieu de destin, déesse des hasards’ (line 3). The sexual theme of colonial androgyny mapped onto the female Buddha reflects not only a parallel between the ‘half-way between’ androgynous figure and the perceived image of Indochina as a geographically hybridised land between India and China,⁴¹ but also, spiritually speaking, between the land where Buddhism and Hinduism were born and the more easterly region marked by the influence of Taoism and Confucianism.⁴² Quang-Am’s spiritual and sexual hybridity are mutually reinforcing and suggest a double image of a degenerate cult and, by extension, a degenerate land. This coheres with a view implicitly promoted by contemporary Orientalists when they valorised textualist Buddhism against the popular living Buddhism of Far East Asia. This Western ‘textualist’ bias can be read in Renan’s deploration of contemporary Buddhism: ‘La religion qui fut la plus philosophique à ses commencements, et où certaines écoles modernes affectent de trouver le dernier mot de la sagesse, est devenue le plus grossier des cultes populaires.’⁴³

Picking up on the trope of the Buddha’s ironic smile, Pouvourville locates the mystery in both her smile and her numerous faces: ‘Le mystère ambigu de tes quatre visages’ (line 14).⁴⁴ The mystery resides not only in her uncanny four-faced nature, but is also linked to the ‘truth’ this goddess holds: ‘Sous ton sourire aigu détient la vérité’ (line 12). Indeed,

⁴⁰ The cult of Virgin Mary was promoted by the mystic Eugène Vintras (1807-1875) and his heretical cult which gained favoured among Catholic artists and intellectuals at the *fin-de-siècle*. On Vintras and his influences on *fin-de-siècle* authors, see Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, pp. 116-36.

⁴¹ Yee, “Indochine androgyne”, 269-82 pp. 275-8). The connection between the perceived in-betweenness of a geographical locale and the overflow of homoeroticism is also discussed by Joseph Allen Boone in his reading of Pierre Loti’s *Azyadé* (1876). Istanbul is seen as a liminal city at the meeting point of the West and the East (*The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, pp. 120-44).

⁴² If Confucianism makes its appearance in our corpus, it is considered by the authors as a cultural and ethical practice, an ancestral tradition mostly embodied in the ‘culte des ancêtres’, rather than a set of spiritual beliefs, in contrast with Buddhism and Taoism. In this sense, Confucius does not fit into our discussion of Far Eastern spirituality as it was understood at the time.

⁴³ *Nouvelles études d’histoire religieuse*, p. 42. On the reconstruction and vivification of a literate and textualist Buddhism within the concept of world religions, see also King, *Orientalism and Religion*, p. 148.

⁴⁴ There exist many iconographic representations of Quang-Am. In this poem, she is represented with four faces which contribute to her intrigue.

vocabulary associated with esotericism abounds: ‘Soleil des nuits, Œil des ténèbres, Clef des doutes’ (line 8) or ‘O statue, enterrée au seuil glacé des Mages’ (line 9).⁴⁵ The ‘occulted’ truth behind her ambiguous smile is revealed to be at once immortal love and the *néant*: ‘D’un amour immortel étreint l’humanité’ (line 15), ‘Face d’argent, cœur de néant, corps de brouillard’ (line 5. My emphasis). The *néant* is ‘hidden’ at the centre, namely in her heart and at the middle sequence of the ‘trimètre’, caught between materiality and evanescence, silver and fog.

The dual meaning of her uncanny smile is informed, on one hand, by Buddhist iconography since Quang-Am is known as the embodiment of loving kindness and compassion. On the other hand, her decadent association with the *néant* can be understood in connection with the dominant view of Buddhism as the ‘Église du nihilisme’. In light of this, the ‘mystère’ of the *congai*-Buddha’s ironic smile in Boissière’s ‘La con-gai’ may well signify *le néant* explicitly expressed in the heart of Quang-Am.

However, the last line of Pouvourville’s poem which celebrates her immortal love embracing all humanity and the poem’s dedication to the poet’s Taoist master Nguyen The Duc⁴⁶ suggest a move beyond the solely threatening view of the *néant* towards a celebratory view of both the *néant* and Far Eastern wisdom in general. Quang-Am’s ambiguous smile provides a synthesis between the two views of Buddhism described by Roger-Pol Droit, namely between the threatening image of Buddhism before the 1885 and the *fin de siècle*’s sympathetic neo-Buddhism. This shift will now be explored through Alfred Droin’s poetry

⁴⁵ The term ‘mage’ is recurrent in the emerging ‘self-confident French esoteric tradition’ which focuses on the phenomena of Spiritism, Mesmerism, Freemasonry and Magic (Julian Strube, ‘Occultist Identity Formations Between Theosophy and Socialism in *fin-de-siècle* France’, *Numen*, 64 (2017), 568-95 (p. 576)). Its representatives are the founders of the *ordre Martiniste*, Gérard Encausse or Papus, the founder of the *Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose Croix*, Stanislas de Guaita and the Rosicrucian writer Joséphin Péladan. Pouvourville has a personal link with Guaita as they were classmates in Nantes. He also dedicates to Péladan a poem in *Rimes d’Asie*, ‘La morsure’, which is imbued with Far Eastern esotericism.

⁴⁶ Nguyen The Duc already appeared as the main character in Pouvourville’s earlier esoteric short story ‘Le Cinquième bonheur’ published in the volume of the same name in 1905 ((Paris: Kailash, [1905] 2004), pp 11-40). The long-awaited fifth happiness represents an unconditional acceptance of death after a lifelong dedication to the study of truth and wisdom. This ultimate happiness is revealed at the same moment as his death and can be seen paradoxically as one of the articulations of the doctrine of *le néant*.

before I return to discuss Pouvoirville's spiritual quest in the context of his political project at the basis of the construction of the *Français d'Asie* circle.

The Dream of Syncretism

After the turn of the century, there is a significant shift in the representation of Far Eastern spirituality in Indochinese colonial literature. The dream of syncretism, whereby the ancient great religions of the East and the West not only share a 'secret doctrine' but also enrich each other's traditions, replaces the threatening tonality of earlier literature. Praised for their offer of a 'universal' wisdom, the esoteric and ancient Eastern spiritual traditions are exoticised and imagined as a source for the renewal of the West.

Alfred Droin's collection of poetry, *La Jonque victorieuse* (1906), is an exemplary case. In the two-part poem, 'Sur un Bouddha du Laos',⁴⁷ the decadent clichés of Buddha are deployed only to be relegated to the background. Smiling, the statue of Buddha is associated from the outset with intellectualism: 'Sur ma table, parmi mes livres, il sourit,' (line 1). If he is presented as an androgyne (lines 13-14), his androgynous traits are nevertheless rendered less unsettling by a comparison with the calm and mysterious smile of Mona Lisa (lines 3-4). Indeed, the familiar trope of enigma (along with the tropes of the smile, mask, and muteness) is developed in a calm and luminous atmosphere marked by wisdom and compassion ('Et son visage omniscient, quoique bénin,/Masque de sa douceur l'énigme universelle', lines 15-16). Located in an ancient past ('Pendant des siècles', line 17), the Buddha is portrayed as the 'pacificateur d'âme' (line 35), namely the saviour offering balance and peace to the soul as well as to the world (line 32). This universal salvation is articulated in terms of affects and emotions ('mutisme émouvant', line 31), anticipating Auguste Pavie's colonialist propaganda,

⁴⁷ Alfred Droin, *La Jonque victorieuse* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1906), pp. 131-37. See Annex 5. Droin had a successful military career in the colonies. Although he spent eight years in Indochina, the Indochinese theme finds its only expression in *La Jonque victorieuse* and not in other works. For a discussion of his life and work and an analysis of his poetry in comparison with that of Albert de Pouvoirville and Jeane Leuba, see Laude, *Exotisme indochinois et poésie*.

À la conquête des cœurs (1921), in the reverse direction with Asia conquering the soul of the conquerors. Accordingly, the Indochinese people who follow Buddha are represented positively as ‘un peuple doux et sage’ (line 21) in contrast to the colonialist discourse that debase the colonised. In line with the primitivist view that was underpinned by the nostalgia for an original state, Egypt and particularly India, as well as the entire Orient along with it, are seen as the ‘cradle of civilisation’; the ‘primitive’ or ‘traditional’ cultures of the East are valorised for its arcane universal peace and harmony.⁴⁸

Through ‘le Silence’ (line 26), the Buddha’s wisdom assimilated as a ‘science immobile’ (line 32) is concealed beneath ‘des grands secrets’ (line 29). This view of Buddhist doctrine as a ‘science’ reflects ‘the deeply felt desire for a reunion between science and religion’ underlying the esoteric revival.⁴⁹ Turning to ‘an imagined past’ both inside and outside France, many identify the conflict between science and religion as a ‘proof of the decadence of modern civilization’ against which the renewal of the ‘sciences occultes’ can provide a remedy.⁵⁰ In its praise of Buddhist doctrine, Droin’s poem, particularly in the second part, can be read as illustrative of this attitude.

Identifying himself as a ‘barbare’ (line 18) the poet, ‘fils de l’Occident’ (line 33), adopts a Buddhist posture in condemning ‘Le Désir’ (line 40) as the origin of his ‘mal métaphysique et le mal de l’amour’ (line 38). Attuned with the view of the decadent West (lines 41-44), the causes generating this ‘mal’ are located not only in his racial and cultural identity, but also in the West’s religious heritage. Race is conflated with religion to represent the decadent French and Western identity (‘mon sang catholique’, line 82). Christianity,

⁴⁸ ‘This nostalgia of origins provided, on the one hand, a much needed sense of continuity with archaic traditions and the natural world, and on the other, a way of defining the West as quintessentially “modern” in contrast to the “primitive” or “traditional” cultures of the East’ (King, *Orientalism and Religion*, p. 147).

⁴⁹ Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, p. 27. While they condemn the empty materialism of positivism for impoverishing modern life, the occultists also incorporate, if not openly proclaim the adoption of, scientific methods and discourses, particularly in the emerging disciplines of psychology and psychiatry, into their reconstruction of esoteric traditions. For the French occultists’ complex attitude towards science, see particularly Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, pp. 196-7, and Thomas Laqueur, ‘Why the Margins Matter: Occultism and the Making of Modernity’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 3 (2006), 111-35.

⁵⁰ Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, p. 27

embodied in Christ ('Le Dieux crucifié sur le front de ma race', line 74), is accused of victimising him (line 98). In stark contrast, this 'Apostat ébloui par un culte nouveau' (line 89) implores Buddha's 'sérénité' (line 97) as the unique path for liberation: 'Ta paix où l'Absolu se dévoile et se nomme' (line 80). This liberation is articulated through esoteric vocabulary and imagery.

The poem ends with the trope of the Buddha's smile, no longer mysterious, but the site where the 'sagesse sublime' is eternally located (line 100). Droin removes decadent ambiguity from Buddha's smile in order to represent an anti-decadent view of Buddhist wisdom as salvation. In a political move similar to Boissière's 'décivilisé' in 'Une âme. Journal d'un fusillé', yet without its ambiguity, spirituality requires this radical move beyond, that is an apostasy which posits the inversion of racial, moral, spiritual and civilisational hierarchies. This is akin to the occultist journey which requires 'a self-conscious break with the past'⁵¹ in order to embrace a syncretic self since orthodox religions are felt to fall short in their responses to modernity.

This iconoclastic renunciation of Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, can also be understood in relation to the 'triumph of the Republic' in which an increasing secularisation leads many not to abandon their spirituality altogether, but, rather, to redefine their spiritual identity in relation to the emerging nationalist sentiment.⁵² Ultimately, Alfred Droin's embrace of Buddhism as secular choice (in contrast to Catholicism), can be interpreted not as a rejection of French or Western identity, but rather as part of this general attempt to redefine the French identity through an interplay between republicanism (of which henceforth colonisation forms an integral part) and esotericism.

Indeed, the poet's self-conscious identification as a 'barbare' is thus defined not only in relation to his racial-cum-spiritual identity as a white man and a Catholic, but also to his

⁵¹ Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*, pp. 7-8.

⁵² On the discussion of the mutability and resilience of religious forms as well as the relationship between the esoteric revival and Catholicism in the French Republic, see Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*, pp. 6-10.

political identity as the conqueror who abducts the statue of Buddha in an echo of Jules Clarétie's story mentioned earlier: 'Dans la pagode antique où mes mains de barbare/Le [le Bouddha] ravirent, parmi l'opulence bizarre' (line 18-19). As such, the poem can be read as a redemption from this initial iconoclastic act through the poet's conversion into a follower of Buddha. The white coloniser's ultimate spiritual regeneration is implicitly the result of this colonial abduction, legitimising the anti-decadent aspect of the conquest and domination of the spiritual, eternal Asia. The imperial identity of a 'Greater France' thus emerges in this poem as being partly shaped by a spiritual regeneration that relies on indigenous spirituality. This attitude heralds Droin's political development in subsequent years. After *La Jonque victorieuse*, his two collections of poetry, *Le Collier d'émeraude* (1908) and *Du Sang sur la Mosquée* (1914), affirm 'une orientation colonialiste sans ambiguïtés'.⁵³

Fin-de-siècle spiritual renewal is thus politically bound up with imperialist violence which, to some extent, mirrors the violence and chaos justified by occultist anarchists in the *métropole* as necessary for the creation of a regenerated utopian society.⁵⁴ This utopian dream, also advanced by a certain vein of socialists, is shaped by an imagined past (in this case, that of an ancient esoteric Buddhist Indochina) and projected into the future (in a synthesis between the East and the West).⁵⁵ This is expressed at the end of the poem by the use of the future tense.

⁵³ Laude, *Exotisme indochinois et poésie*, pp. 20-25. Droin conceived of the literary project called 'le cycle de la plus grande France' between the two Wars.

⁵⁴ For a study of the relationship between occultism, anarchism, literature and nationalism, see Jean-Pierre Dufief, 'Un anarchisme teinté d'occultisme: Paul Adam' in *Littérature et anarchie*, ed. by Alain Pessin and Patrice Terrone (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1998), pp. 411-26. Paul Adam's 'imaginaire de la catastrophe', which concerns the fantasy of a barbarian invasion coming from 'l'ailleurs exotique' and gives birth to a regenerated utopian society echoes with, in a reverse manner, Alfred Droin's dream of conversion to Buddhism in an exotic land.

⁵⁵ Julian Strube's discussion of socialism in the construction of the esoteric identificatory discourses at the end of nineteenth century in France foregrounds the utopian ideology shared by both socialism and esotericism, particularly through the influential 'socialist magus', Éliphas Lévi. This utopia can be found in the socialist doctrine of *synthèse* or *association universelle* which is reflected in the occultist concept of *synarchie*. 'Synarchie' strives for a "synthesis" of all human knowledge as the basis of a perfect social order, in short, calling for the universal synthesis of science, religion, philosophy and politics ('Occultist Identity Formations', 568-95 (p. 584)).

This ‘syncretic’ dream is conspicuously articulated through the esoteric image of syncretism in another poem by Droin, ‘Sur un Bouddha rituel’.⁵⁶ In contrast to the iconoclastic tone of ‘Sur un Bouddha du Laos’, a sentiment of shared universal wisdom as well as a sense of brotherhood between Christianity and Buddhism are embraced in this sonnet dedicated to the esoteric poet Émile Michelet (1861-1938). In opposition to ‘Sur un Bouddha du Laos’, which posits an irreconcilable binary opposition between the East and the West, Indochina and France, in this poem the poet establishes a filial relationship between Jesus and Buddha: ‘Frère aîné de Jésus par l’immense douceur’ (line 9). This syncretic brotherhood reflects what Nietzsche terms the ‘second Buddhism’ happening in the Europe of his time. Tracing the popularity of Buddhism among Europeans back to Europe’s decadence, Nietzsche considers this phenomenon in syncretical terms: Europe becomes ‘une sorte de Chine européenne [...] avec une douce croyance bouddhique-chrétienne et, dans la pratique, un savoir-vivre épicurien’.⁵⁷ While Nietzsche refers, with irony, to Buddhism’s ‘counter-invasion’ back home in its ‘mild’ version of neo-Buddhism, Droin’s poetry reveals the antecedent condition of this counter-invasion. It is the military invasion of extra-European lands that renders possible the spiritual ‘décivilisation’ of the invaders in such a way that not only is ‘Empire...the historical vehicle of syncretism’,⁵⁸ but European modernity itself is shaped by the counter-effect.

Droin’s syncretic attitude evokes a close affinity with modern Theosophy which widely informs *fin-de-siècle* arts, from painting to literature.⁵⁹ Paul Ranson’s *Christ et Bouddha*

⁵⁶ *La Jonque victorieuse*, pp. 81-82. See Annex 6.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Droin, *Le Culte du néant*, pp. 210-11. Michel Houellebecq refers to Nietzsche and his view concerning ‘la menace d’un nouveau bouddhisme sur l’Occident’ in his personal reading of Schopenhauer. He identifies the German philosopher’s ‘contemplation paisible, détachée de toute réflexion comme de tout désir’ as an idea that ‘n’appartient pas réellement à l’histoire culturelle occidentale’ and links it to Buddhism (*En présence de Schopenhauer* (Paris: Édition de L’Herne, 2017), p. 50).

⁵⁸ Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion*, p. 60.

⁵⁹ Modern Theosophy has its apogee in the advent of the influential Anglo-American esoteric society, the Theosophical Society. Cofounded by the Russian émigré Helena Petrova Blavatsky and her associate Henry Steele Olcott in New York in 1875, its headquarters were moved to an estate near Madras in southern India in 1882. This relocation back to the root of Asian wisdom is to be put in the context of the empire, mirroring Droin’s and many French authors’ trajectory discussed in this thesis. To summarise, Theosophical doctrine is

(circa 1890) represents a visual transposition of this syncretic dream in a similar manner to Droin's poem (Figure 10). The deep blue colour used by this Nabi painter in the Symbolist style evokes, for the initiates, the astral plane discussed by occult circles, in contrast to the bright bloody colour associated with Jesus Christ. The contrast of colours depicting the two world religions' leaders creates at once a tension and a complementarity. Exoticised through the presence of the stylised Egyptian lotuses, the Buddha is depicted in his hieratic pose and in line with the tropes explored earlier (the motif of the mask, the primitivist style, and so on). He is foregrounded as if to signify his older origin. Both leaders are represented through their most familiar iconography and both offer the salvation or liberation of humanity.⁶⁰

Droin's two poems illustrate the ways in which the threat of Buddhism can be refashioned into an agent of regeneration with implicit nationalist tonality linked to the Greater France. This nationalist attitude I try to suggest was in fact a common currency in the discussion of Buddhism at the time. Jules de Gaultier's article, 'Le Bouddhisme en Occident' offers one of the most systematic exposés of how Buddhism's ancient or primitive energy can be reoriented into a regenerative 'expédient' to save Europe from decadence. Gaultier mobilises biological discourse, degeneration theory, social Darwinism as well as a critique of modernity to support a racialist theory that draws on the contemporary philology of languages. Through the process of the racialisation of the philological theory of language, India (the birthplace of Buddhism) and Europe shared an Aryan or Indo-European origin. Thus, Buddhism is portrayed as having a 'parenté' with Christianity (and Aryan Europe). While the Greek spirit feeds into European artistic expression, the Hindu spirit (Indian and

an eclectic mix which mainly promotes the belief in the primordial Tradition (present in spiritual and religious doctrines of humanity) and the universal divine providence, the utopian dream of universal peace and harmony, as well as a celebration of Eastern wisdom drawn from Hinduism and Buddhism. As a global phenomenon, the Society was influential particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom and attempted to gain ground in France from the 1880s. Most of the soon-to-be prominent French occultist leaders, like Papus and Stanislas de Guaita, were involved in Theosophy before breaking with the Society in the 1890s due to its increasing rejection of Christian doctrine in favour of Asian spirituality.

⁶⁰ Deyasi argues that the Buddha in Ranson's painting presents 'clear references to Southeast Asian art' (Deyasi, 'French Visual Culture and "Indochina"', p. 88).

Buddhist) does the same in the moral domain: 'Le Christianisme dans son essence morale est bouddhique'.⁶¹

The Decline of Decadence: Pouvoirville's Franco-Asian Identity

I have so far examined different co-existing representations of Far Eastern spirituality in the colonial literature of Indochina, from the decadent Buddha, cruel but alluring, to the universal liberator sentimentally praised for his regenerative energy. This ambivalent imagery of Indochinese spirituality is built upon a tension between decadent aesthetics of the *néant* and the anti-decadent regenerative vision promoted by the syncretic dream. This ambivalent representation informs not only the Western view of Asian spirituality, but also the changing boundaries of French identity itself.

Albert de Pouvoirville's esoteric project emerges as an exemplary case in relation to identity politics within the empire. He attempts to redefine and systematically incorporate Indochinese spirituality as one of the main components of a newly-formed colonial identity, the *Français d'Asie* within the context of a 'Greater France'. Although decadent aesthetics pervades his articulation of Indochinese spirituality, as we have seen in the poem 'La Déesse' for instance, his esoteric poems tend to relegate these elements into the background and present an image of a 'pure' and ancient doctrine in close affinity with the scholarly concept of world religions and Theosophy's doctrine of primitive and universal wisdom. To do this, Pouvoirville shifts the focus from Buddhism to Taoism, in contrast to most of the authors who focus on Buddhism and the figure of Buddha. This allows him to represent the Indochinese spiritual tradition as a 'textualist' doctrine based on secret teachings transmitted esoterically through a filiation from the master to the disciple.⁶²

⁶¹ Jules de Gaultier, 'Le Bouddhisme en Occident. Une renaissance hindoue', *Mercur de France* (1898), 367-93. Gaultier was also known as the chief advocate of Nietzscheism in France.

⁶² For Pouvoirville's biography, see chapter two. At the turn of the century when Pouvoirville was being initiated into Taoism in Indochina, he was also in contact with many occultist groups in France such as Fabre des Essarts' Gnostic Church and the famous occultist journal *L'Initiation* (Laude, *Exotisme indochinois et poésie*, pp. 32-3). He translated Taoist texts into French with commentaries signed under his pseudonym Matgioi. See *La Voie rationnelle* (Paris: Société d'éditions contemporaines, 1907), *La Voie métaphysique* (Paris: Les Éditions

It is in *Rimes d'Asie* (1912), his collection of poems mostly written in Indochina, that esoteric poems are the most predominant. Esoteric themes and vocabulary can be read in poems such as 'La science', 'Pierres rares', 'La morsure', 'Ly Dong Than', 'Le sage', the aforementioned 'La Déesse', 'Le secret', 'L'inaction', 'La mort du sage', 'Les tours', 'La nuit', 'La paix', 'Fohi', 'La faim'. Replacing the ambiguous figure of the Buddha, most of these poems are haunted by the figure of the Taoist sage as well as references to Lao-Tseu and Taoist sacred texts.

While drawing on the decadent model established by Boissière, which focused on an Oriental sage living among books, sensuality and opium, Pouvoirville's sage, who meditates on life among books and opium smoke, is depicted instead as an ascetic hermit. Peaceful acceptance of death as well as inaction, renunciation and contemplation constitute the subject of the poems in *Rimes d'Asie*.

In 'La paix', the dying sage pronounces these wise words: 'Les livres m'ont tout dit du culte originel.' (p. 178). In 'La mort du sage', the sage, following 'la Voie' (p. 133) – a reference to one of the meanings of Tao –, embraces his death because 'Les Cinq Livres l'ont fait paisible et confiant' (p. 134). In 'Les Tours', the description of the stone and jade towers reveals the secret behind the décor: 'Dédaigneuse du bruit, la Science péremptoire/Aux seuls silencieux dévoile son secret. (p. 146). Rather than a nihilist threat to the metaphysical categories of being and existence, the *néant* superimposed by the 'Voie' or 'Loi' is valorised in his poetry as both an 'expérience pratique' and a 'sagesse' in line with the emergence of neo-Buddhism and the end of the 'culte du néant'.⁶³

traditionnelles, [1905] 1936), *Le Traité des influences errantes de Quangdzou* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Haute science, 1896), and *Le Te de Laotsen* (Paris: Librairie de l'art indépendant, 1894). His monograph on Taoist secret societies (*Le Taoïsme et les sociétés secrètes chinoises* (Paris: Editions de L'Initiation, 1897)) proves his interest in arcane knowledge and its transmission through esoteric Chinese networks in Indochina. He was thus considered 'le premier importateur en Occident de la sagesse extrême orientale' (Théophane (pseud. Léon Champrenaud), *Matgioi et son rôle dans les sociétés secrètes chinoises*, p. 5).

⁶³ 'Voilà qui annonce effectivement le déclin du culte du néant. Le *nirvana* qui fut tour à tour, dans l'imaginaire de l'Occident, un grand mensonge ou un grand repos, un absolu ou un gouffre, une énigme ou un havre, peut devenir une expérience pratique'. Neo-Buddhism was understood henceforth 'au sense general de "sagesse"' (Droit, *Le Culte du néant*, pp. 222-3).

This imagery of an Asian sage who holds the key to the primordial Tradition⁶⁴ finds its visual evocation in a series of pastel drawings at the turn of the century by Odilon Redon called *Bouddha*. In the version held at the Musée d'Orsay (Figure 11), Buddha is represented as a peaceful saviour.⁶⁵ His threatening aspect linked to the 'culte du néant' is removed, along with decadent aesthetics, in favour of the Symbolist style where an esoteric message of wisdom and compassion is suggestively evoked by ethereal and transparent colours.

This refocusing of the representation of Asian spirituality in Pouvourville's poetry heralds the decline of decadent aesthetics and its fascination with exotic mysticism in favour of an 'objective' vein close to ethnographical writing as promoted by the theorists of colonial literature from the 1910s onwards. 'Truthfulness', or *le vrai*, deriving from an understanding of indigenous culture and mind such as Pouvourville's profound knowledge of Indochina is viewed as the *sine qua non* criterion in the definition of the 'true' and 'good' colonial literature (as opposed to the 'littérature de tourisme' or 'd'escale' that was characterised by inaccuracy due to its lack of immersion in the native culture).⁶⁶

Concurrently, this move away from decadent aesthetics in the representation of Indochinese spirituality, while sacralising it, also depoliticises it. Pouvourville's glorification of Taoism over other indigenous traditions downplays the 'impure' elements of Indochinese eclectic spirituality. At the same time, the representation of Far Eastern spirituality as a whole as both a timeless suprahistorical religion and a textualist wisdom kept within the still living esoteric circles of the East (and the West through occultist knowledge) removes the disruptive potential inherent in its otherness. This strategy illustrates 'the progress by which the West's image of the Orient passes from primitive to actual, that is, from disruptive

⁶⁴ Stanislas de Guaita, Pouvourville's classmate in Nancy, and his occultist group, the Rose-Croix, believe that the continuators of the primordial tradition moved to the East (Laude, *Exotisme indochinois et poésie*, pp. 33-4).

⁶⁵ According to Droit, this image of Buddha is mainly vulgarised by an international bestseller, *The Light of Asia* (1879) by the English Edwin Arnold (*Le Culte du néant*, p. 223).

⁶⁶ The expression 'la littérature coloniale, la vraie, la bonne' comes from Pierre Mille in his preface to Pujarnsicle's *Philoxène ou la littérature coloniale en France*, p. 5.

invigoration to condescending veneration'.⁶⁷ Once depoliticised, the threatening *néant* becomes harmless and is replaced by an accessible Asian wisdom, a manageable form of imperial knowledge.

This 'condescending veneration' characterising Pouvoirville's project of spiritual renewal forms part of a wider political project, that is, the construction of a new colonial identity for the French in Indochina named the *Français d'Asie* circle. Considered by his contemporaries to be one of the founding figures (alongside Jules Boissière and a certain Pérez) and the brainpower of this dual-identity project, Pouvoirville published a programmatic article in 1909 entitled 'Les Français d'Asie'.⁶⁸ Although this article discusses the literary character of this 'petite école' rather than its spiritual character, it provides us with a foundational rationale that sheds light on Pouvoirville's spiritual project as well as defining his identity politics as a whole.⁶⁹

Their first task is to 'faire connaître, aimer et respecter dans son intégralité l'âme héréditaire de cet Extrême-Orient.' The mission the *Français d'Asie* propose to undertake is characterised as 'une tâche de respect' commanded by love, a certain 'sensibilité' of

⁶⁷ Said's preface to Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. xi. The expression 'condescending veneration' is Schwab's.

⁶⁸ Pouvoirville, 'Les Français d'Asie', 179-89.

⁶⁹ The list of the members and their writings ranges from the 'littérateurs' *stricto sensu* to those written on arts, anthropology, Franco-Asian law, psychologie, and politics. For the origin of the foundation of the *Français d'Asie* and its mode of action, see Kapor, 'A Displaced Associationism'. Following Pouvoirville's foundation of the circle in Paris in 1909, there emerged a number of literary journals published in Indochina that responded to his project. This occurred in spite of Pouvoirville's initial exhortation of the French of Asia not to 'créer d'organes nouveaux qui ne toucheraient personne, à cause de leur nouveauté et de leur spécialisation' ('Les Français d'Asie', p. 185). *Les Pages indochinoises* however announces in its first volume an intention to be 'les petits frères de ces Français d'Asie, des petits frères restés dans la colonie et qui l'aiment et qui la veulent chanter' (1 September 1912, p. 1). While Pouvoirville orchestrates this 'institution' from Paris, René Crayssac (1883-1940), mentioned in Chapter Two in regard to his poetry collection *Sous les flamboyants*, appears as one of its main instigators in Indochina, although his name is absent in Pouvoirville's programmatic article, which we shall discuss now. A poet and literary critic, Crayssac publishes poetry under the pseudonym Mat-Giang and actively contributes to literary journals such as *Les Pages indochinoises: revue littéraire et artistique* (Hanoi, 1912-26), *La Plume indochinoise: revue littéraire et artistique* (Hanoi, 1912-13), and *La Revue indochinoise* (Hanoi: François-Henri Schneider, 1893-1925). He is the founder of the first two journals. He also writes an important column for *La Revue indochinoise* called 'Les poètes français d'Indochine' where he introduces French poets of Indochina like Pouvoirville (September-October 1917, n° 9-10, pp.179-230), Alfred Droin (July-August 1917, n° 7-8, pp. 25-72) and Jeanne Leuba (November-December 1917, n°11-12, pp. 345-402). These literary activities in Indochina as well as the consistent homage paid to Boissière, Pouvoirville and Droin by these 'petits frères' ended up encouraging several members of the *Français d'Asie* (Pouvoirville, Ajalbert, Droin, Nolly) to send them their texts during the 1912-3 period and to assimilate Crayssac and the journals' regular contributors to the group.

observation and a profound understanding of their protégé but also as a form of colonial managerial skills.

Pouvourville does not call for a *décivilisation* nor for an equal communion of the two cultures despite his ‘indigénophilie’. Rather, what he seeks to construct is a specific kind of hybrid identity that acts as an agent of the empire, operating at ephemeral moments named ‘les points de jonction des esprits européen et asiatique’, at that interstitial space between the metropole and the colony.⁷⁰ This identity appropriates knowledge about France’s Asian possessions’ culture, spirituality and psychology within the French empire’s own borders, helping to consolidate consciousness of the imperial self at a global level (see Figure 12 for an ideal image of this hybrid identity).⁷¹

Politically speaking, this rhetoric represents ‘a soft form of associationism,⁷² as opposed to the politics of assimilation hitherto implemented in Indochina. This philanthropist-cum-Orientalist task can be compared to the rationale underlining the excavation and preservation of the archaeological ruins of Angkor, as we shall see in the last part of this chapter. Mirroring this political and cultural associationism, the inclusion, in Pouvourville’s article, of a spiritual syncretism that embraces Asian spirituality as respectable and valuable to France can be seen as an integral part of his deliberate identity politics.

First and foremost addressed to the metropolitan public,⁷³ Pouvourville’s Asian-inspired occultist project is, in fact, in stark contrast with metropolitan occultism and nationalism. The metropolitan French occultist leaders such as Stanislas de Guaita, Joséphin Péladan and Papus aim to construct a ‘self-confident French esoteric tradition’ devoid of ‘foreign’ elements from the East. This is mainly in reaction to the international influence of

⁷⁰ Pouvourville, ‘Les Français d’Asie’, p. 180. On this intercultural and ‘pseudo-diasporic’ aspect of the Franco-Asian circle, see Kapor, ‘A Displaced Associationism’, p. 4 and 6.

⁷¹ ‘Qu’il le veuille ou non, le brillant et multiforme esprit français a désormais sa facette asiatique’ (Pouvourville, ‘Les Français d’Asie’, p. 180)

⁷² Kapor, p. 7. Pouvourville is also the author of a colonialist essay signed by his pseudonym Matgioï, *Les Défenses de l’Indo-Chine et la politique d’association* (Paris: A. Pedone, 1905).

⁷³ Pouvourville, ‘Français d’Asie’, p. 185.

Anglo-Saxon Theosophy with which they originally aligned their project, before their desire for France to become the occult centre of Western esotericism takes over.⁷⁴ Pouvourville's glorification of Far Eastern religions as part of a new French identity that transcends national boundaries thus appears to be at odds with the Franco-centric nationalism claimed by metropolitan occultism. His spiritual project seeks to be at once nationalist and colonialist.

From the transnational occultist perspective, however, Pouvourville's colonialist agenda becomes clearer in contrast with the political radicalism in the form of opposition to British rule that characterised the British Theosophical Society, particularly after its headquarters moved to India in 1882. Speaking in 1875 of the Vedas as the primeval origin of all religions, Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), the then president of the Society, 'appealed to Hindus by defending their faith against that of the colonial power' as well as giving room for believers of other faiths. He insisted that the ancient wisdom was taught by all religions of the world.⁷⁵ In 1885, Allan Octavian Hume (1829-1912), the son of the radical social reformer Joseph Hume, who had been an active member of the Theosophy Society before his split with the founder Helena Blavatsky two years earlier, successfully orchestrated the first conference of the Indian National Union in Bombay. With an ambition to found an all-India association, this organisation was renamed the Indian National Congress. The articulation of a national identity which united Indians of all faiths relied on the background discourse provided by the Theosophy Society concerning Indian heritage and religion as well as the networks, made possible by the Society, that brought together liberal Britons and Indian nationalists. Later, Annie Besant, the anti-Church Freethought social reformer and birth-control campaigner of the 1870s and socialist of the 1880s, became the leader of the Theosophy Society in 1891.⁷⁶ She also became a major figure in the nationalist movement in

⁷⁴ Strube, 'Occultist Identity Formations', (pp. 576-7).

⁷⁵ Mark Bevir, 'Theosophy and the Origins of the Indian National Congress', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 7 (2003), 99-115 (p. 108).

⁷⁶ For Annie Besant's life as a feminist activist in relation to the *fin-de-siècle* sexual politics and the occult, see Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, Illinois; London:

colonial India and the only Western woman elected as president of the Indian National Congress.

In the British case, intercultural contacts between Western occultism and Indian spirituality contributes to the emergence of a native nationalist awareness. In contrast, Pouvourville's spiritual syncretism, as part of the *Français d'Asie* group, reveals its colonialist limitations, not only in its racial (and gender) exclusivity but also in its elitism.⁷⁷ While the boundaries of the imperial self are redrawn to include an Asian cultural heritage, the racial, class and gender boundaries of imperial rule are in fact upheld through this spiritualised identity politics.⁷⁸

Over a decade later, however, French occultism is in turn recuperated as part of the expression of a modern national identity by the religious movement named Cao Dai or the 'Great Way of the Third Cycle of Universal Salvation of the Highest Platform'. Its origin lies in the 1920s with the spirit-writing activities of Nho Van Chieu (1878-1932), a lowly Vietnamese civil servant working for the French colonial administration in Cochinchina who began to preach a credo based on the unity of world religions he claimed to have received from Taoist masters.

Cao Dao emerged in a specific colonial and syncretic milieu, at a crossroads between Western occultist influences (spiritism, freemasonry, and the Theosophical Society) and the

University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 93-96. See also Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁷⁷ Gender exclusivity can be seen in the all-male members of the circle for which Pouvourville claims to follow 'cette autre détermination asiatique de demeurer entre hommes' ('Les Français d'Asie', p. 188). As for its elitism, he imposes 'la dure sélection' as the condition of entry and recognises 'un chiffre restreint d'adeptes' (p. 185). This aspect evokes the secret societies both in the European and Asian esoteric and political traditions. It is also linked to the idea of esoteric knowledge being accessible only to the initiates. This elitist aspect was also promoted in the programme of the esoteric journal, *La Voie*, founded conjointly by Léon Champenaud and Pouvourville in 1902 (quoted in Théophile (pseud. Léon Champenaud), *Matgioi et son rôle dans les sociétés secrètes chinoises*, p. 34). There was however one Eurasian among the members of the circle, Sie-Ton-Fa, a Doctor of Law and prefect of the Chinese Empire, who would soon be reported in the French press as a political exile.

⁷⁸ Some earlier occultists, however, adopted an anti-colonialist stance with an affiliation to the radical left, especially anarchism, in contrast to Pouvourville's essentially imperialist agenda. On this topic, see Deyasi, 'French Visual Culture and "Indochina"', pp. 39-46.

Chinese tradition of salvationist religions.⁷⁹ The Western Orientalist discourse glorifying the ancient spiritual traditions of Indochina is recuperated ‘to articulate a vision of universal spiritual civilisation’ that claims to be at once a universal church, a state religion and an increasingly anti-colonial spiritual force.⁸⁰ This is carried out through a double strategy of adopting French occultist language and rhetoric, on the one hand, and on the other hand, demoting the Chinese language from what had long been its role as the classical hegemonic religious language in favour of the newly formed national language, the Romanised *quoc ngu*, as well as (initially) the French language.

Just as Pouvourville made use of spirituality to consolidate imperial Franco-Asian identity, Cao Dai inverts Western spiritual discourse concerning the Orient and recasts it for the colonised’s political purposes. Cao Dai can thus be seen as a spiritualised example of Homi Bhabha’s concept of ‘cultural translation’ grounded in hybridity: ‘Cultural translation desacralizes the transparent assumption of cultural supremacy, and in that very act, demands a contextual specificity, a historical differentiation *within* minority positions.’⁸¹ By mirroring and inverting the Orientalist gaze, Cao Dai reshapes the Orientalist discourse in the colonised’s own, “speak[ing] back” to Europeans, in their own idiom, with the intent not only to express indigenous beliefs and ideas in European languages, but also to construct an

⁷⁹ The central aim of Chinese salvationist religions or Chinese folk religious sects was to pursue the salvation of the individual and the society through Taoist self-cultivation. For a study of Chinese salvationist traditions in relation to anti-imperial nationalism, see Prasenjit Duara, ‘The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism’, *Journal of World History*, 12 (2001), 99-130. During the colonial era before the foundation of the Vietnamese Theosophy Section in Vietnam in 1952, Vietnamese intellectuals were members of the French Section of the Society operating within Indochina. For the history of the Vietnamese Section, see ‘Vietnam’, in *Theosophedia. The Theosophical Encyclopedia* (Manila: Theosophical Publishing House), <http://theosophy.ph/encyclo/index.php?title=Vietnam,_Theosophy_in> [accessed 1 October 2019].

⁸⁰ It is nowadays the third-largest religion in contemporary Vietnam. During the Japanese occupation, it established its own army. It controlled a large part of South Vietnam during the ensuing war of independence. Graham Greene recounts its military power in *The Quiet American* (1955) and depicts its temple in this way: ‘Christ and Buddha looking down from the roof of a Cathedral on a Walt Disney fantasia of the East, dragons and snakes in technicolor’ (London: William Heinemann & The Bodley Head, [1955] 1973, p. 85). Its saints include Joan of Arc, Thomas Jefferson, Sun Yat-sen (the revolutionary father of Chinese republicanism) and Victor Hugo. For a study of its complex relationship with anti-colonial and nationalist politics through the biography of its leaders, see Jérémy Jammes, ‘Caodaism in Times of War: Spirits of Struggle and Struggle of Spirits’, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 31 (2016), 247-94.

⁸¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 327.

alternative Oriental vision of spiritual civilisation, universal and superior to that of the West.⁸²

THE ALLURE OF RUINS CULTURAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL *NÉANT*

Within the French colonial imagination about her only Asian colony, there is arguably no rival for the mysterious and alluring image of the ‘ruines d’Angkor’.⁸³ The place these ruins held within a wider ‘culture coloniale’ was epitomised by the magistral role reserved for its replica at the 1931 *Exposition coloniale internationale* in Paris. This coronation constituted the acme of a long-standing colonial genealogy generated by the continuous and concerted efforts of explorers, writers, artists, colonial administrators and scholars.

For the *fin-de-siècle* French public, the naturalist Henri Mouhot (1826-1861) was mythologised as the ‘discoverer’ of the Khmer ruins.⁸⁴ His fame arose following the posthumous publication of his diaries and drawings in 1863 by the weekly popular magazine *Le Tour du Monde*.⁸⁵ The immediate success of Mouhot’s ‘Voyage dans les royaumes de Siam, de Cambodge, de Laos, et autres parties centrales de l’Indo-Chine’ historically marked the emergence of the ‘myth of Angkor’ not only in France but across Europe as the story was published almost immediately in Italian, German and English.⁸⁶

⁸² Jammes and Palmer, ‘Occulting the Dao’, 405-28 (p. 406).

⁸³ Angkor Wat is the main temple of Angkor, the capital city of the Khmer empire (9th to 15th centuries CE) at its zenith. The temple is considered the largest religious structure ever built covering 162.6 ha (1,626,000 m²). Within this megacity another majestic monument that also exerted a long-standing fascination among explorers and travellers at the *fin-de-siècle* is Bayon, with its grandiose human-faced towers.

⁸⁴ According to the *Trésor de la langue française*, the word Khmer officially entered into the French language in 1873 although the term was commonly used in travelogues long before. If the term Khmer generally refers to the native people of today’s Cambodia and their language, the *fin-de-siècle* texts usually use Khmer for the ancient civilisation associated with Angkor and valorise it in contrast to denigrated contemporary Cambodia. Charles-Émile Bouillevaux notes the Siamese (today Thai) origin of the term *Cambodge* used by the French and contrasts it with the term, Khmer, used by the Cambodians to refer to themselves (*Voyage dans l’Indo-Chine, 1848-1856* (Paris: V. Palmé, 1858), p. 172).

⁸⁵ Mouhot succumbed to malaria in 1862 in Laos. His body as well as his papers were transported back to Bangkok, Thailand, by his guides. He was buried in the Protestant graveyard in Bangkok.

⁸⁶ Anthony Barnett makes a compelling remark about the ways in which the materiality and visual appeal of this large-format magazine *Le Tour du Monde* contributed to the success and the mass dissemination of the myth of Angkor (‘Cambodia Will Never Disappear’, *New Left Review* (1990), 101-25 (p. 110)). Founded in 1860, it was France’s first travel journal and was shaped by an imperialist agenda, aiming to ‘inform the public and politicians

Mouhot was not the first Frenchman to visit Angkor.⁸⁷ The missionary Charles-Émile Bouillevaux visited ‘Ancor’ (*sic*) in 1850 and published his travelogue in 1858.⁸⁸ It is now also widely accepted in Western scholarship that the ‘discovery’ of Angkor by a Western man was a fabrication. Angkor has always been an important religious site for the region and its existence has always been known by the people of Southeast Asia as well as foreigners.⁸⁹ But Mouhot was the first Westerner to give a detailed account of the ruins, hence ‘rediscovering’ them for the West. As such, following the fanfare surrounding Mouhot’s travelogue, the myth of a white man’s discovery of the ancient ruins in the deep forest of Cambodia, and more importantly, his visual and emotional evocations of the ruins as well as his tragic death, become a powerful grand narrative, feeding into subsequent narratives about the phantasmatic Angkor, to use Norindr’s evocative terms.

This romantic narrative of European exploration was soon appropriated by colonial ideology as France sought to open a new commercial route to China and to counter the influences of other European countries in Asia, particularly the British and Dutch. Cambodia became a Protectorate thanks to a treaty signed between King Norodom I and Napoleon III in 1863, coinciding with the publication of Mouhot’s travelogue and marking the beginning of an era of intensive exploration into the Mekong Delta up to the north of Tonkin and its

about the value and potential of overseas countries and peoples so that France might better decide “what we should take, and what we should leave” (Edwards, *Cambodge*, p. 19).

⁸⁷ After being turned down by the French government, Mouhot eventually secured funding from the Royal Geographical Society of Britain and the Zoological Society of London to collect new zoological specimens in the Mekong basin. He visited ‘Nokhor ou Ongkor’ (*sic*) in 1860 accompanied by Siamese guides and Chinese coolies.

⁸⁸ Following the international recognition of Mouhot, Bouillevaux bitterly complained about this, but to no avail (Edwards, *Cambodge*, pp. 260, note 5). Reflecting on the ruins, Mouhot cited Bouillevaux’s poetic words in one of his passages about the extinction of a people (‘Voyage dans les royaumes de Siam, de Cambodge, de Laos, et autres parties centrales de l’Indo-Chine’, in *Le Tour du monde, nouveau journal de voyage* (Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1863), pp. 219-352 (p. 304)).

⁸⁹ The Chinese Chou Ta-Kouan visited Angkor in 1294 and saw it as the wealthiest state to China’s south. In the 16th century, Portuguese and Spanish explorers also visited the capital. Writing in the 1950s, Louis Malleret, then director of the *École française d’Extrême-Orient* (from 1949 to 1956), while recognising these previous visits nevertheless reframed Mouhot’s ‘discovery’ within the perspective of a Franco-French archaeological genealogy: ‘Avec Henri Mouhot, on peut dire que l’archéologie indochinoise était fondée.’ (‘Histoire abrégée de l’archéologie indochinoise jusqu’à 1950’, *Asian Perspectives*, XII (1969), 43-68 (p. 44)).

frontier with China.⁹⁰ The Khmer ruins not only became, physically, one of the major exploratory, and later archaeological, sites of Indochina; they also came to symbolise a political and cultural site through which France constructed a decadent image of contemporary Cambodia, while redefining its modern identity as an imperial nation as we shall see.

In contrast to the fascination Angkor had entertained in the *métropole* since the 1860s, colonial literature came surprisingly late to the theme. This quasi-silence is all the more striking when we think about the enduring fascination inspired by Angkor Wat from the colonial period until the present day, not only among tourists but also as a subject of study by scholars from various fields, from visual culture and anthropology to history and politics.⁹¹

Indeed, the trope of the Angkor ruins seems to be developed and perpetuated in a specific genre of travel writing first by explorers and later by metropolitan authors, which was lavishly illustrated. Far from representing the ruins realistically, these evocative drawings and sketches often blur the line between objective and imaginative representation (Figure 13).⁹² Thanks to their mass circulation, the visual power of these illustrations had long-lasting

⁹⁰ The main explorations after Mouhot were mostly supported by the French government such as the Mekong Exploration Commission led by Doudart de Lagrée (1866-8) who was the main instigator of the 1863 Treaty of Protectorate, the Mission Delaporte (1872), doctor Jules Harmand's mission (1875-7), Étienne Aymonier's missions (1879-85), doctor Édouard Maurel's mission (1884-6), the Mission Fournereau (1886-8), and Lunet de Lajonquière's serial missions (1900-1908). Often a participant in one of these expeditions later led his own mission.

⁹¹ There seems to be a resurgence of studies of Angkor in recent years, particularly through new approaches developed in visual anthropology and literary and cultural studies. Museology, exhibitions and their relationship with the French colonial imaginary and modern Cambodian nationalism are the main focus of these scholars. In addition to works quoted throughout my analysis, see also Michael Falser, 'From Gaillon to Sanchi, from Vézelay to Angkor Wat. The Musée Indo-Chinois in Paris: A Transcultural Perspective on Architectural Museums', *RIHA Journal*, 71 (2013), 'From a Colonial Reinvention to Postcolonial Heritage and a Global Commodity: Performing and Re-enacting Angkor Wat and the Royal Khmer Ballet', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 20, 7-8 (2013), 702-23, as well as 'The First Plaster Casts of Angkor for the French Métropole: From the Mekong Mission 1866-1868, and the Universal Exhibition of 1867, to the Musée khmer of 1874', *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, 99, 1 (2012), 49-92, Tim Winter, *Post-Conflict Heritage, Postcolonial Tourism: Culture, Development and Politics at Angkor* (New York: Routledge, 2007), and Penny Edwards, 'Taj Angkor: Enshrining L'Inde in le Cambodge', in *France and "Indochina": Cultural Representations*, ed. by Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee (Lanham, Md.; Oxford: Lexington, 2005), pp. 13-27.

⁹² Partly due to the limitations of technology before photography could be reproduced in print, illustrations of early publications were usually executed by illustrators in Paris who obviously hadn't visited the sites, on the basis of drawings, sketches and sometimes photography made by the explorers.

effects on the French public and inspired later travel writing as well as fiction written by early literary ‘tourists’ of Angkor like Pierre Loti, Paul Claudel and André Malraux.⁹³

The ruins of Angkor were not part of Indochina until 1907 when France signed a treaty with Siam (modern Thailand) for a retrocession of three Cambodian provinces (annexed by Siam since 1794), Battambang, Sisophon and Siam Reap (where Angkor is located) back to Cambodia. This treaty was part of a series of inter-imperial struggles between France and Britain in Southeast Asia, and of regional rivalries between Cambodia and Siam.⁹⁴ The political significance of France’s archaeological actions must be understood against the backdrop of this transnational tension. Because of these geo-political disputes, early French colonial writers would have probably found Angkor a somewhat foreign land with not much to do with what they knew as ‘French Indochina’ since most of them were living in, and hence more familiar with, the Vietnamese part of Indochina.

However, if the Angkor ruins were quasi absent in colonial literature during its burgeoning period in the 1890s, there are ubiquitous echoes of them, particularly in the trope of the forest. In an echo of Jules Boissière’s initiatory short story ‘Dans la forêt’ (1896) discussed in Chapter One, Alfred Droin’s poem, ‘Spiritus’, displaced Boissière’s ‘forêt

⁹³ In *Un Pèlerin d’Angkor*, Loti felt disappointed when his childhood quest was realised in 1901. What he was experiencing did not match his life-long fantasy (Pierre Loti, *Un pèlerin d’Angkor* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1912), p. 56). This disillusion not only resonates with Baudelaire’s view in ‘Le voyage’ (‘Pour l’enfant, amoureux de cartes et d’estampes’, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, pp. 129-34) contrasting a childhood dream to adult disillusionment; it also expresses the trope of ‘belatedness’ linked to experiences in the modern world. Claudel visited the ruins as an official guest of the King of Cambodia in 1921. He wrote a poem inspired by this visit which was destroyed in a fire at the French embassy in Japan in 1923. Following this, he again wrote in 1926 a short dialogue relating the memory of this visit entitled ‘Le Poète et l’encens’ (*Œuvres en prose* (Paris: Gallimard ‘Le Pléiade’), pp. 836-47). This short dialogue between the poet and an incense vase is about rescuing the lost memory of Angkor. Malraux visited Angkor in 1923, faced an infamous trial for the theft of Khmer artefacts in 1924 and published his novel, *La Voie royale*, in 1930.

⁹⁴ The tension between France and Siam, which was considered to be under British influence, was heightened in 1893 by the French-Siamese war. This ended with Siam conceding Laos to the French who established a protectorate. See Lawrence Palmer Briggs, ‘The Treaty of March 23, 1907 between France and Siam and the Return of Battambang and Angkor to Cambodia’, *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 5 (1946), 439-54. In 1896, France and Britain signed a treaty agreeing on the frontier between British Upper Burma and the French protectorate of Laos. The ‘Entente cordiale’ signed in 1904 helped to end their disputes in Southeast Asia, partly due to their reciprocal failure to find new commercial routes into China via Yunnan. In an exchange for receiving the three Cambodian territories in 1907, France withdrew her troops from Siamese territory and renounced her demand for extraterritoriality for her Asian subjects living in Siam.

impénétrable’ (p. 22) situated in North Tonkin from the time of the pacification to the decadent Cambodia at the time of first explorers.⁹⁵

The Angkorean Buddha Head: from Spiritual *Néant* to Cultural and Archaeological *Néant*

‘Spiritus’ is the penultimate and longest poem of Alfred Droin’s collected volume, *La Jonque victorieuse*. It depicts a journey of a young hero whose name gives the poem its title, from the Mekong river to the deep forest in search of a Buddha among the Angkor ruins. After stealing ‘Idole fatale’ (p. 192), he cannot find his way out of the forest where death eventually overtakes him. Picking up on the trope of the tropical forest, the poem can be read as a *fin-de-siècle* eclectic *potpourri*, combining decadent aesthetics, occultism, Buddhism and the fascination for ruins. ‘Spiritus’ thus offers a compelling synthesis of the spiritual *néant* and the archaeological *néant*, linking the Buddha’s ironic smile to the allure of Angkor ruins.

The hero is portrayed as an idealist in pursuit of the ‘Beauté’ (p. 173) – ‘l’impossédable’ (p. 175) –, a poet-philosopher (p. 177), a ‘conquérant’ (p. 176), an adventurer, an ‘exilé volontaire’ (p. 175), and an ‘Alchimiste du rêve’ (p. 177). Spiritus is a ‘sterile’ Decadent who loves women but remains ‘sans amour’, an aesthete for whom ‘Les marbres, les tableaux, la musique, les vers/Étaient pour lui le vrai, le réel univers’ (p. 178). As an atheist, he nonetheless enjoys the sensuality and eroticism he finds in Christianity (p. 177) while adhering to the ‘secrets’ (p. 174) and the ‘surnaturel’ (p. 178) of *fin-de-siècle* occultism (‘Il ne pouvait parler que de choses célestes.’ (p. 179)).

On his journey, he stops in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, to see the already famous classical ballet dancers, ‘les danseuses sacrées’ (p. 176), performing at the ‘Palais-Royal’ (Figure 14). The presence of these ‘vivantes visions d’un ballet symbolique’ at the opening of the poem serves to announce the stone-carved Apsaras, the dancers from the

⁹⁵ Droin, *La Jonque victorieuse*, pp. 171-99. See Annex 7. Due to the number of the verses, I will use the original page numbers instead of the verse number when quoting.

bas-reliefs of Angkor ruins that Spiritus is to discover. Indeed, the association between the Apsaras and the Cambodian royal ballet dancers was materialised for the French public in 1906, the same year as the publication of Droin's poems, during the official visit of the Francophile king of Cambodia. King Sisowath brought along with him his Royal ballet troupe to perform in front of the Cambodian pavilion at the *Exposition coloniale* in Marseille.⁹⁶ Scholars see this event as a turning point in the colonial construction of the myth of Angkor as the ballet troupe enjoyed great success with the French public as well as avant-garde artists.⁹⁷

In several respects, Spiritus's journey reflects the colonial Angkor route which combines a visit to the ruins and a performance by the Royal ballet at the royal palace. This colonial route, stage-managed by French officials and Cambodian elite, was undertaken by prominent figures such as Pierre Loti and Paul Claudel, heralding the post-colonial commodification of the Cambodian cultural and archaeological heritage, where present day tourists can even see the dance performed on site within Angkor Wat.

In colonial literature as well as in the metropolitan imaginary, the Apsaras, of which these living dancers are seen to be the embodiment and re-enactment, help reinforce the myth of the antique character of the ruins.⁹⁸ Their antiquity, seen as manifest in the sacred

⁹⁶ This pavilion were somewhat fanciful, yet the first reconstruction of Angkorean architecture, the pavilion, was nevertheless described by the press as 'authentic' (Deyasi, 'Indochina, "Greater France" and the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris: Angkor Wat in Blue, White and Red', 123-41 (p. 129)).

⁹⁷ Avant-garde artists such as Gauguin, the dancer Loïe Fuller, and particularly Auguste Rodin who produced about 150 drawings and paintings of the Khmer troupe, contributed to this success. For a study of the importance of Cambodian dancers in the articulation of *fin-de-siècle* primitivism, and Rodin's primitivism in particular, see Deyasi, 'French Visual Culture and 'Indochina'', pp. 99-178. The dancers were invited to perform in Paris after Marseille and were considered a sensation by the press. This Royal ballet troupe was in fact newly formed under the initiative of the French representative in Phnom Penn George Bois, pieced together from two private troupes and inmates of the debtors' prison. For the revival of the Khmer dance as a colonial commodity, see Falser, 'From a Colonial Reinvention to Postcolonial Heritage and a Global Commodity: Performing and Re-enacting Angkor Wat and the Royal Khmer Ballet', 702-23, and Paul Cravath, 'Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia (Ritual)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hawaii, 1985), pp. 168-72.

⁹⁸ Recent scholarship has been interested in the seminal role played by the first French child ever born in Indochina, later a graduate of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, George Groslier (1887-1945) in the rebirth and re-imagining of the earthly Khmer dancers as a direct embodiment of the bas-reliefs of celestial Apsaras at Angkor Wat. Groslier published the first in-depth study of the royal court dancers, entitled *Dansesuses*

nature of the dancers' postures, projects the ruins as contemporary with the great Mediterranean civilisations and nevertheless primitive, that is to say pre-dating historical time.⁹⁹ However, it is in colonial literature that these antique dancers take on an overtly decadent slant as embodiments of the antique *and* mystic *femme fatale*.

After the antique dance, Spiritus on resuming his journey can thus indulge his reverie in a fantasy of a decadent Phnom Penh: 'Cité du mysticisme et de la volupté/Où des femmes, les seins mi-nus, sous la clarté,/Enivrent les regards de leurs formes parfaites,/Et caressent les sens d'une odeur de jasmins' (p. 184). Representing a worldly visual embodiment of the otherwise otherworldly Apsara (Figure 15), the living dancers in their contemporary incarnation add eroticism and mysticism to the allure of the ruins yet to be discovered.

In an echo of 'Spiritus', Pierre Rey's sonnet 'La Danseuse', published in 1923 recycles the same imagery while directly associating the Khmer dancers with both Salomé and the trope of the Oriental harem.¹⁰⁰ The main dancer Nou's make-up and body is represented in a Baudelairian way. Focusing on her make-up, particularly the line around her eyes seen as references to the ancient Hindu text, 'le signe de Védas' (line 6), she is compared to 'un bijou vivant'. Her dancing body swiftly moving towards the King's throne is erotically depicted as 'le bel insecte d'or' (line 13), in a reminiscence of Farrère's decadent princess, Anna, in 'Les bêtes'. The poem ends with a reference to Angkor through the image of the King being 'le

cambodgiennes anciennes et modernes, in 1913. An active colonial writer, his novel, *Le Retour à l'argile*, won the *Grand prix de littérature coloniale* in 1929.

⁹⁹ One of the early mentions of Angkor Wat in metropolitan literature can be found in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Ève future* (1888). The protagonist Edison's depiction of Angkor reflects this antique imaginary: 'Les architectes de la citadelle sacrée d'Ang-Kor, ces Michel-Ange inconnus d'un temple où se joueraient une ou deux douzaines de Louvres et dont la hauteur passait de moitié, je crois, celle de la pyramide de Chéops, — [...] temple tellement ancien qu'il est impossible d'en découvrir le dieu ni la provenance, ni de reconnaître le nom de la nation, perdue dans la nuit des âges, qui en construisit le vaste miracle!' (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, Eugène Fasquelle, [1888] 1909), p. 25). The reference to Michelangelo echoes with Mouhot's expression, 'ce Michel-Ange de l'Orient' ('Voyage', p. 299). See also Rodin's evocative descriptions about the living dancers embodying 'les principes mêmes de l'art antique' at the origin of human creation (Gustave Coquiott, *Rodin à l'Hôtel de Biron et à Meudon* (Paris: Librairie Ollendorff, 1917), p. 123).

¹⁰⁰ Pierre Rey, *La Terre de Bouddha* (Florida: DatASIA, [1923] 2013). For the transcription of the poem, see Annex 8. By coincidence, George Bois's article, *Les Danseuses cambodgiennes en France*, which reports on the success of the dancers in France and quotes Rodin's impressions of the dancers, was published in *La Revue indochinoise* in September 1913, the same year as Rey's poem.

Fils des grands Rois qui bâtirent Angkor' (line 12) and Nou's final portrait as 'la frêle amazone' (line 14). This *fin-de-siècle* readymade fantasy came to be implicit in any evocation of the Angkor ruins, as attested, for instance, by the right-wing Académicien Pierre Benoît's popular novel *Le Roi lépreux* (1927).¹⁰¹

Leaving Phnom Penh behind, Spiritus is conscious of turning his back on the present and journeying back in time: 'Qu'importe à Spiritus la ville d'aujourd'hui?/Il veut voir la cité sur qui pèse la nuit/Formidable des temps et des forêts mythiques:/Il veut voir Angkor-Thom et les dieux du passé' (p. 185). The poet recycles here the trope of a lost past associated with ancient ruins in general; yet with the Khmer ruins, the break with their living descendants is particularly foregrounded.

This trope had already been enunciated in the 1860s by the first travellers like Mouhot and Bouillevaux. While Bouillevaux hesitantly dates Angkor Wat to the 11th-12th centuries, according to information he gathered from sages and scholars of the country;¹⁰² Mouhot does not pick up on this historical detail. Rather, dismissing the native legends concerning the foundation of the city as mere fabulation, he focuses on the trope of the lost past and the ruins' remoteness from the present: 'ces ruines peut-être incomparables, seuls vestiges malheureusement d'un peuple qui n'est plus et dont le nom même, comme celui des grands hommes, artistes et souverains qui l'ont illustré, restera probablement toujours enfoui sous la poussière et les décombres.'¹⁰³ Underlining the grandeur of the past and the loss of

¹⁰¹ *Le Roi lépreux* (Paris: Albin Michel, [1927] 1962). Pierre Benoît (1886-1962) apparently visited Indochina during the 1920s. The novel inspired film director Jacques Feyder who wanted to make the Indochinese version of *L'Atlantide*. Although the film remained unfinished, his trip to Indochina resulted in a short film, *Au pays du roi lépreux* (1927).

¹⁰² Bouillevaux, *Voyage dans l'Indo-Chine*, p. 172. As early as the 1880s, the chronology of ancient Cambodia was first established by the scholars of *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) and the Khmer city was known to be contemporary to medieval Europe, and not as ancient as the earlier Mediterranean civilisations, unlike what was believed and popularised by the first explorers. The Khmer inscriptions were first deciphered by the Dutch scholar, Hendrik Kern, at the University of Leyde in the 1870s (Malleret, 'Histoire abrégée de l'Archéologie Indochinoise', 43-68 (p. 45)). Originally the *Mission archéologique permanente de l'Indochine* founded by Paul Doumer, the EFEO was founded in 1900 in Saigon before moving to Hanoi in 1902 following the move of the capital to the Tonkinese city.

¹⁰³ Mouhot, 'Voyage', p. 298.

its memory, he strategically constructs a grand narrative of a cultural and racial ‘fall’ that proved to be instrumental to the French colonisation of Cambodia in later decades. While the Khmer ruins are seen as the testimony of ‘le peuple puissant, civilisé et éclairé’, the Cambodians are seen as degenerate, being in ‘l’état de profonde barbarie’ and, at times, having nothing in common with their Khmer predecessors.¹⁰⁴

In contrast to its relationship with Cochinchina (and later Tonkin and Annam) whose people were seen as possessing a continuous knowledge about their heritage, the French image of Cambodia is defined through France’s anti-decadent power to discover, restore, preserve and disseminate this ancient heritage through its archaeological, museological and exhibition projects. Of such knowledge and actions contemporary Cambodians were considered ignorant and incapable. More than any other territory in colonial Indochina, Cambodia came to represent, through the increasing importance of the Angkor ruins within French nationalist discourse, the decadent nation *par excellence*.

Curiously, the two terms – ‘décadence’ and ‘ruine’ –, despite their etymological difference, both mean ‘to fall’.¹⁰⁵ Whereas ‘décadence’ mainly concerns a process of cultural and civilizational fall, ‘ruine’ refers more specifically to architectural remains resulting from and testifying to this fall. It is thus not difficult for the *fin-de-siècle* mind to establish a natural link between the two, merging the 18th-century aesthetics of the picturesque to their own obsession with the decline of modern civilizations while racialising the Khmer ruins and the contemporary Cambodian colonised population as a separate race.¹⁰⁶ This point will become even more central in our last section. This close link between the notion of Decadence and the ruins is evocatively suggested, although in a resentful tone, by the Saint Lucian

¹⁰⁴ Mouhot, p. 295 and 299.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Décadence’ comes from the late latin ‘decadentia’ from the infinitive ‘decadere’; ‘ruine’ from the latin ‘ruina’ which is the participial form of ‘ruere’, to fall.

¹⁰⁶ For the study of the picturesque associated with ruins in 19th-century French literature, see Ingrid Daemrich, ‘The Ruins Motif as Artistic Device in French Literature (Part 1)’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 30 (1972), 449, and ‘The Ruins Motif as Artistic Device in French Literature (Part 2)’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 31 (1972), 31-41.

postcolonial poet, Derek Walcott when he warns against lingering European influence in postcolonial culture: ‘decadence begins when a civilization falls in love with ruins’.¹⁰⁷

The trope of loss is deployed in ‘Spiritus’ through the image of darkness, particularly associated with the forest. In a somewhat *fantastique* vein reminiscent of Jules Boissière’s tale ‘Dans la forêt’, the forest is described as at once ‘horrible et sublime’ (p. 188), due to its luxurious vegetation and poisonous impurities (p. 187). Its ambivalence attracts Spiritus ‘comme attire un abîme’ (p. 188) because of the ‘secrets’ (p. 187) it holds which, as the poem unfolds, are revealed to be the main statue of Buddha at the centre of Angkor.

The lexical field associated with the ‘abîme’ which permeates the poem can be read not only spatially and literally as evoking an unknown dangerous space, but also metaphorically from the perspective of the spiritual, for this abyss is built up around the Far Eastern object of spiritual desire. This abyssal *néant* is significantly mirrored in the architectural elements of Angkor Wat, merging the spiritual *néant* with the archaeological *néant*. The gates incrustated into the structure are viewed by Spiritus as ‘de[s] trous noirs’,¹⁰⁸ while the complex with its ‘pyramidales’ towers is abyssal in its height: ‘Vertiginieusement, comme un hymne de pierre’ (p. 189).

However, as the poet starts his ‘ascension’ (p. 191) into the different levels of the complex, the temple is no longer associated with darkness, but with *light*. This image of light seems to stem from the occult-inspired tropes associated with Buddhism, shifting the tonality of the narrative towards that of mystical idealism. Its towers viewed as ‘immatérielles/Vers l’infini’ are compared with ‘un lotus de lumière’ while the Apsaras, though ‘Courtisanes du

¹⁰⁷ Derek Walcott, ‘A Dilemma Faces W. I. Artists’ in *The Journeyman Years: Occasional Prose, 1957-1974*, vol. I, *Culture, Society, Literature, and Art*, ed. Gordon Collier (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), p. 69, quoted in Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*, p. 3. Walcott argues in his 1964 newspaper article, ‘A Dilemma Faces W[est] I[ndian] Artists’, that those, particularly the British historian James Anthony Froude and V. S. Naipaul, who claim there is no history, hence no ground for creativity to build up on, in the West Indies do so because they ‘suffer from the longing of that decadence.’ (quoted in *Derek Walcott*, ed. by Edward Baugh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 9).

¹⁰⁸ Claudel is struck by these black holes as he noted this detail several times. He also uses the word ‘néant’ when developing his idea that Angkor Wat’s square architecture refers in fact to the notion of ‘l’étang’, of still water (‘Le Poète et l’encens’, p. 840-1).

ciel', are seen as holding 'l'énigme'. Similarly, as the possibility of recovering history seems to open up ('L'âme des siècles morts revivait dans sa pierre'), the architectural elements are depicted not as ruined or destroyed but, instead, as being constructed with harmony, force and grace (p. 190-1).

This journey towards 'Le sage' at the highest level of the complex is thus a spiritual journey, in the Dantean manner, towards the doctrine of Buddhism. Buddha 'hors du cercle des métempsychozes/Médite, sans bouger, à la cime des choses' (p. 191). In ecstasy at the top of the temple, the poet finally dares to look at 'l'Omniscient' who, surrounded by darkness and repugnant animals like bats and reptiles, ambivalently represents the 'terreur' (p. 192).¹⁰⁹ This draws us back to the '[culte du] néant' anticipated by the journey through the forest in line with the *fin de siècle's* ambivalent representation of Buddhism as threatening but merciful.

Composed in octosyllables instead of alexandrines to mark a change in the narrative, the last part of the poem relates Spiritus' hopeless flight back into the forest and his failed attempt to get out of it. Carrying the head 'Rouge et or du Bouddha qu'il a décapité,/Du Bouddha d'Angkor Vat, de l'Idole fatale/Dont le front dominait la pagode royale' (p. 192), he catches a fever (probably referring to malaria, a common fatal fever in the region) and collapses. This act of deicide – cutting off the Buddha's head – is explained by his Idealist desire to 'posséder sa beauté', reminiscent of Villiers de l'Isle d'Adam's hero, Bonhomet mentioned in Chapter One. More significantly, in an echo of Jules Clarétie's colonialist hero, this sacrilege reflects the acts of violation and displacement committed by European explorers during the period of the 'discovery' of the ruins (anticipating the scandal of the 'Affaire Malraux' in 1923).¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ This striking presence of the bats is also noted by Pierre Loti (*Un pèlerin d'Angkor*, pp. 117 and 127) and Claudel. The latter calls them 'vampires' ('Le Poète et l'encens', p. 841). The same word is used by Spiritus to describe the air of the forest (p. 188).

¹¹⁰ *La Voie royale* (1930) is the fictionalised version of this infamous affair. See Gabrielle Abbe, 'les Pièces de "l'affaire Malraux"', *Le Monde Hors-Série*, July-August 2018, pp. 60-62.

The trope of the Buddha's smile ('le dieu qui sourit dans ses bras' (p. 193)) as well as that of the effeminate Buddha ('Ce dieu joint à sa force une douceur de femme' (p. 196)) once again place this poem in line with the decadent aesthetics through which Far Eastern spirituality is filtered. While other travellers such as Loti and Claudel note both the Buddhist and Brahman aspects of the temple, Droin chooses to focus on the Buddha alone (with one reference to Brahmanism (p. 185)), perhaps in response to its decadent appeal.

The poem ends with Spiritus reflecting on life in an Idealist ecstatic state, in tune with the long-standing tradition of the aesthetics of ruins: 'L'assaut de l'impossible au galop des chimères!/Rêver, lutter, vouloir! Vivre d'éternité/Par la possession des choses éphémères!' [...] 'Créer de la beauté !' (p. 194). Traditionally, the ruin 'whether construed in medieval Christianity [...] or in the humanist, moral sense of *vanitas* (*memento mori*) and transience (*sic transit gloria mundi*), or of glory and inevitable fall' served 'as the pretext for a meditation – on religious truth, on the exemplarity of history or on the inevitable passing of time.'¹¹¹ Similarly, after noting native legends inspired by the ruins, Mouhot also gave a melancholic meditation on the rise and fall of civilisations and on the *néant* of human creativity, commenting on a quote from Bouillevaux: 'A cette pensée amère, à cette preuve ironique du néant des grandeurs humaines, que de fois me suis-je senti comme étreint par les rameaux de l'épaisse forêt qui encombre, presse, ensevelit les palais et les temples d'Angkor'.¹¹²

After the final attempt to let go of the Buddha in order to lighten his weight, he succumbs to temptation and takes the head back 'Et s'en va vers la mort, sous le fardeau divin...' (p. 196). This fatal end not only draws on the perceived curse of Angkor befalling early explorers-desecrators,¹¹³ it also gives an ambiguously ironic tonality to Spiritus'

¹¹¹ Karen Lang, 'Ruins', in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. by Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹¹² Mouhot, 'Voyage', p. 304.

¹¹³ This 'curse' centres on a Mouhot-type figure with a tragic end. Following Mouhot, who died of malaria in 1882 after visiting Angkor, three members of the Mekong Exploration Mission, Doudart de Lagrée, Francis

adventure, turning his overtly enthusiastic and naïve Idealism into pathos. Indeed, this occult-inspired poem foregrounds the ambivalence of Decadence *vis-a-vis* colonial heroism, casting doubt on the regenerative nature of the imperialist conquest; it can also be read as a critique of Idealism and, more broadly, as part of Decadence's self-critical stance. Idealism's all-too-predictable failure reinforces the Buddhist doctrines of impermanence and nothingness. By desiring to possess the Angkorean Buddha's head as both an aesthetic and spiritual object, the poet-aesthete-adventurer (hear Idealist-decadent-colonial) ends up experiencing Buddhist doctrine physically, and this is his *anéantissement*, the nothingness of death.

Imagining the History of Angkor: Pouvourville's 'Metahistorical' Tale

If colonial literature occupies the prominent place in this thesis, a closely related form of writing about the colonies is ethnography, or studies in what came to be called broadly the 'social sciences', which touched on various aspects of the colony's life and culture. Many colonial writers had written monographs or shown interest in this 'scientific' approach.¹¹⁴ In this perspective, the new emphasis on accuracy in institutionalised colonial literature can be seen as marking a complete merging of literature with scientific objectivity, at least in its theoretical framework.

Garnier and Louis de Carné, died in different circumstances after their visit to Angkor. The curse of Angkor was partly inspired by the nineteenth-century mummy's curse, later popularised world-wide by legend of Tutankhamen's curse after the opening of his tomb in 1922. For a study of Egyptian mummies as a fetish in 19th-century literature, see Dominic Montserrat, 'Unidentified Human Remains: Mummies and the Erotics of Biography' in *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings: Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity*, ed. by Dominic Montserrat (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 162-97.

¹¹⁴ Jeanne Leuba is one such writer who participated in emerging 'scientific' discourses concerning the colony. 'Collaboratrice de son mari, M. Henri Parmentier, chef du Service archéologique de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient', she was seen by many as an expert in Indochinese archaeology (Chivas-Baron, Clothilde, 'La Vie des colonies. Notre Indochine: Jeanne Leuba', in *La Vie*, 15 November 1928, pp. 385-387, article in the *Dossier Jeanne Leuba* at the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand in Paris). Following excavations undertaken alongside her husband, she wrote a book on the Cham civilisation and cultures as well as a book on the Angkor ruins commissioned by the colonial authority for a popular readership. See Jeanne Leuba, *Un royaume disparu. Les Chams et leur art* (Paris and Brussels: G. Van Oest, [1915] 1923), and *Les Ruines d'Angkor* (Melun: Imprimerie administrative, 1914).

Pouvourville's short story on Angkor Wat represents a transitional period in this tendency towards a more Realist(ic) view of the colony. 'Le Roi Rouge' (1910) interweaves *fantastique* lore and pseudo-ethnographical discourse, with an acute sense of historical imagination in line with the nineteenth century's obsession with history. Dedicated to the composer Camille Saint-Saëns, the story relates the 'history' of Angkor Wat from prehistoric times to the present.¹¹⁵ Unlike Alfred Droin and other authors examined above, in re-imagining the history of the foundation of the city of Angkor, Pouvourville does not rely on decadent aesthetics as much as the discourse of cultural Decadence and its implications for the reformulation of world history. Just as the discovery of Asian religions led to a reformulation of the history of world religions and the place of Christianity within it, the discovery of ruins and other civilisations in Asia and extra-European regions over the course of the nineteenth century challenged the narrative of world history as it was written in the West.

In a manner reminiscent of the Biblical story, the story begins with a prehistoric geological event called 'la Grande Nuit', when a tectonic flood engulfs the hitherto connected flat land and creates the 'presqu'îles asiatiques' (p. 161). The group of people led by 'les Rois Rouges' remains on Malaysia. But as the island was too small for them, they decided to cross the gulfs 'à la conquête des terres continentales'. From the outset, the Red Kings' people are portrayed as the conquerors, and their story of immigration which happens 'avant qu'une histoire fût écrite' is depicted as a march towards the beginning of history. They arrive at the Mekong plain, conquer the 'pays Khmers' and enslave the indigenous people, that is to say both the Laos and the Khmer. The latter are depicted, in an evolutionist manner, as an inferior and peaceful 'race jaune' who can easily be reduced to docile enslavement due to their biological constitutions as well as the influence of the climate and environment on their

¹¹⁵ Pouvourville, *Le Cinquième bonheur*, pp. 161-81.

character (p. 161-2). In a manner similar to, but slightly different from Mouhot's opposition between contemporary Cambodians and the ancient Khmers, Pouvourville deliberately sets up a contrast between the Khmers or Cambodians (in merging them his version differs from Mouhot's) against the Red, the race created by his imagination. The latter is depicted in his narrative as the conquerors who order the construction of Angkor 'sous la sueur et le sang des vaincus' (p. 162), exploiting the Khmers' labour.

Significantly, this racialised discourse reflects an influential pseudo-scientific discourse on the origin of the 'inequality of human races' as epitomised by Arthur de Gobineau. The intermixing of races is seen by Gobineau as the universal cause of the rise and fall of world civilisations. The white race, particularly the branch of the Aryans considered the most superior in humankind, is the origin of civilisations:

C'est là ce que nous apprend l'histoire. Elle nous montre que toute civilisation découle de la race blanche, qu'aucune ne peut exister sans le concours de cette race, et qu'une société n'est grande et brillante qu'à proportion qu'elle conserve plus longtemps le noble groupe qui l'a créée et que ce groupe lui-même appartient au rameau le plus illustre de l'espèce.¹¹⁶

Indian civilisation's 'foyer se trouvait dans un Rameau de la nation blanche des Ariens (*sic*)'.¹¹⁶

In line with this theory, observing the Leper King, one of the most famous statues of the Brahman-Buddhist complex of Angkor, Mouhot can thus declare 'le type de cette statue est essentiellement celui des Ariens de l'Inde antique' and sets it as the example of 'la plus haute civilisation de l'Inde' against the local tradition that sees in this Leper King the Khmer founder of Angkor.¹¹⁷ What is interesting in Mouhot's theory for our purpose is not what the Leper King really represents, but rather his function as a means of associating the cultural artefacts of Angkor Wat with Aryan traits.

These discourses concerning the decadence of empire and an essentialist view of racial difference underlie Pouvourville's version of the rise and fall of the Khmer city. While

¹¹⁶ *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (Paris: P. Belfond, [1853, 1855] 1967), p. 209 and 11.

¹¹⁷ Mouhot, 'Voyage', p. 302. This statue is now displayed at the National Museum of Phnom Penh.

the Red Kings do not immigrate from India and there is no reference to the word ‘Aryan’,¹¹⁸ they represent essentialist traits typical of Gobineau’s Aryans, as the conquerors, builders of civilisations and writers of history: ‘Et, sur tous les murs, des milliers d’artisans du marteau et du ciseau, par des reliefs de batailles, de camps et de triomphes, sculptèrent l’histoire que les Rouges dédaignaient d’écrire’ (p. 162-3). With the construction of Angkor imposed on the conquered by the conqueror, history is now on the move.

Against this beginning of the history of Angkor emerge two main characters. The authoritarian Red King who orders the building of his gigantic statue in one hundred days and Sao, the greatest and oldest sculptor, head of the family named after him, who is ordered to supervise this construction. On the last day, the final task waiting to be accomplished – the head needs to be joined to the top of the body –, Sao allows himself and his workers a rest. Angry at this sight, the King visits the site and strangles Sao’s with his bare hands until the latter collapses. The statue is finished by another sculptor on the same day. Transported to his home, the dying Sao becomes a synecdoche for the entire race: ‘L’âme de tout un peuple étranglé par la tyrannie’ (p. 167). On his deathbed, he is visited by the god Daithanh who promises that his race will be saved and avenged.

A century later, Angkor reaches its golden age: ‘la capitale rouge ruisselle de richesses’ (p. 169). The King’s statue is now considered ‘père de la dynastie’ while the Sao family falls into poverty, regressing to a primitive and ignorant state (p. 170-3). Yet, they keep passing on the God’s promise from generation to generation. Then, drawing on the European narrative of the Barbarian Invasions as the cause of the fall of the Roman Empire, the Angkor civilisation is invaded by the tribes from the north. The Khmer capital falls ‘en ruines’, ‘s’est pouri et a peu à peu disparu. Mais la pierre orgueilleuse est demeurée’ (p. 171). The

¹¹⁸ In *Un pèlerin d’Angkor*, Pierre Loti perpetuates a similar myth of the origin of Angkor based on the conquest of the natives by Indians and locates this immigration not in time immemorial but at the time of Alexander the Great (4th century BC) (p. 71). The Brahmanist influences in the construction of Angkor Wat render this claim about the Indian military conquest more convincing although it was anachronistic and went against historical facts.

description of this decline echoes the biblical episode of the punishment of Sodom and Gomorra as it emphasises human vanity and the death of cities. In a way that is reminiscent of illustrations of Angkor in the popular press, vegetation invades and devours the temples while animals elect them as their abode. The statue of the Red King is not spared, disappearing under dust and enveloped by ‘le tronc majestueux d’un grand jacquier’ which ‘projette, sur la couronne et sur sa pointe aiguë, l’ombre de ses feuilles éternelles, tandis que des branches et des lianes issues de l’arbre montent doucement le long du torse, et s’enroulent autour du cou et des bras qu’elles fleurissent’ (p. 172). This majestic tree had grown out of the jackfruit Sao was eating when the Red King strangled him.

Then the age of imperialism arrives: ‘au livre éternel s’est ouverte la page où l’histoire contemporaine est écrite’ (p. 173). The ‘hommes de l’Occident’ are depicted as a more civilised version of the Aryan Red Kings with ‘leurs vaisseaux, leurs soldats, leurs canons, leurs richesses et leurs invention étranges, qui les font plus savants et plus forts que les autres races du monde’ (p. 173-4). In contrast, the Red are completely forgotten and wiped out of history (p. 174). These new conquerors, whom one can identify easily as the French, send their ‘savants’ and ‘explorateurs’ to explore the region and pacify the far-flung untouched tribes.

The story continues that some travellers hear of ‘l’existence de l’ancien royaume rouge’ and that only an old man who lives alone in poverty can lead the way to these ruins. The old man accepts to guide them to ‘les trésors anciens enfouis dans la forêt’ (p. 176) since he is the last descendant, with no heir ‘à qui léguer le secret’. Following this native guide, the French discovers the ruins beneath the vegetation. The beauty and magnificence of the monuments inspire in them the desire to collect, excavate and decipher in order to gain access to the memory of this great civilisation: ‘Ces très beaux vestiges enthousiasmèrent les explorateurs qui avaient des âmes d’artistes et aussi des collectionneurs. Curieux de rapporter dans leur patrie et d’honorer dans leurs musées les plus beaux et les moins lourds de ces

monuments, et aussi de déchiffrer peut-être dans les sculptures les chapitres d'une histoire inconnue' (p. 177).

At night, the old man falls ill 'd'une fièvre mauvaise' as if cursed by his desecration of the ruins (p. 177-8). Before dying, he decides to confide his secret 'au plus jeune des voyageurs'. He, 'le dernier de la race à qui la promesse avait été faite', tells the story of the first king, the statue, the murder, the prophecy of revenge to this 'Blanc'. Next year, the French explorers come back to the ruins to dislodge and bring more artefacts and sculptures back home.

One day, the young explorer discovers the biggest statue he has ever seen, whose parts are covered by the jackfruit tree and buried under the soil. They then realise that this is 'la statue fameuse du Roi Rouge' of the prophecy (p. 180). Amused by 'la plus curieuse des légendes', the young Frenchman is more determined than ever to uncover the statue. However, their plan is aborted when they see two big snakes curling around the statue's head and throat while the jackfruit's root 'emprisonnait le cou du Roi Rouge' (p. 181). The story ends with a grand revelation concerning the long-awaited prophecy. When the rain finishes washing away the soil, 'on peut voir, suivant le serment de Daithanh, les racines du jacquier de l'étranglé serrer éternellement, sous la terre, la gorge de pierre de l'étrangleur'.

Pouvoirville's narrative is half-way between a fable and a 'metahistory', a term coined by Hayden White and re-defined by David Harvey to characterise the history writing of French occultists such as Fabre d'Olivet. This 'elaboration of highly complex and fanciful metahistories' seeks

less to recount a chronological, fact-based account of the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* (as it essentially was), [...] than to present an epic narrative, which may or may not be factually accurate, but whose purpose is to use the authority of history to deliver a message whose nature is primarily moral or philosophical. Metahistory, in my usage, is thus the displacement of one history onto another, the use of historical narrative as a rhetorical device, either to comment obliquely on contemporary events

too sensitive to address directly or to seek in the remote past the origins of present-day social formations.¹¹⁹

However, while the French occultists saw in historical writing ‘a means of revealing the guiding hand of Providence and the stages of man’s fall and reintegration with the divine’ as well as ‘the key to the construction of a better society’,¹²⁰ Pouvoirville’s metahistory is embedded within the colonial condition.

This version of Angkor history maps a Western cultural diffusionist model characterised by immigration, conquest and civilisation on to Indochina. It is also an ethnogenesis, since it recounts the genealogy of the ‘Angkor civilisation’ by identifying two apparently distinct racial groups: the Red and the Khmer. At the same time, inspired by the nostalgia of origin underlying Orientalist discourse, particularly *vis-à-vis* India during the nineteenth century, as well as an evolutionist view of race, Pouvoirville’s ‘metahistorical tale’ draws an implicit parallel between the Aryan Red and the modern French. They are both conquerors and builders of civilisation. However, while the primitive Red are brutal rulers, the modern French are more refined and civilised: they are artists at heart as well as producers of knowledge. The French possess both an aesthetic sense aroused by the ruins and the intellectual curiosity for modern scientific inquiry, suggested by their plans for archaeological excavations and museum collections as well as their desire for historical knowledge through deciphering transcriptions. This is encapsulated by such figures as the French explorers Louis Delaporte whose self-fashioning journey from a military officer to a dilettante of past Oriental civilisations, and ultimately, professional curator of respectable museums, suggests the transitional period in Western history when an adventurer embedded within the colonial context came to take on a more scientific angle and laid the foundations for scholarly research.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, pp. 35-6.

¹²⁰ Harvey, p. 37

¹²¹ After participating in the Mekong Exploration Commission in 1866-68, Delaporte took upon himself the task of cataloguing more ruins after the death of both of his companions, Doudart de Lagrée (who died in duty

The tale thus offers a simultaneous alignment with and disavowal of the Aryan Red. This can be compared with the ambivalent way in which Orientalist discourse at once identifies the West with and distances it from the ‘mystic East’: ‘This nostalgia for origins provided, on the one hand, a much needed sense of continuity with archaic traditions and the natural world and, on the other, a way of defining the West as quintessentially “modern” in contrast to the “primitive” or “traditional” cultures of the East’.¹²²

This ambivalence is strategically mediated through a double articulation of cultural Decadence. Decadence refers, on one hand, to the decadence of the contemporary Cambodians in contrast with the glorious past of Angkor and, on the other hand, to the rise and fall of empires represented through the decline of the Red. The latter articulation particularly requires a cautionary distance from the Angkor civilisation. However, the two points of view concerning the Khmer ruins join together in supporting the anti-decadent ideology of the civilising mission, underlined by the contrast between the protector and the protected, between France as the rightful heir to Angkor and Cambodia as her protectorate, in need of help to reconnect with its own lost past. Hence, Sao’s family which stands for the native race is portrayed as subordinate as well as degenerate (‘sans nom et sans intelligence’, (p. 178)). As their lineage comes to extinction, their secret needs to be delivered to the legitimate and capable heir.

after the crew reached China) and Francis Garnier (killed in north Tonkin by Chinese ‘pirates’ and subsequently a national hero). He led a ‘Mission d’exploration des monuments Khmer’ in 1872, bringing back to France plaster casts as well as dislodged original pieces which formed the first collection of the short-lived *Musée Compiègne* in 1874. One of the most significant pieces of his collection, the Giant causeways of Phrea Khan temple, was the highlight of the 1878 *Exposition universelle* in Paris and is said to have introduced the French public to Khmer arts. Visitors can still see this piece today at the entrance of the Musée Guimet in Paris. His collection was moved, under his curatorship, to the Khmer collection dubbed the *Musée Khmer* at the Trocadero in 1879 and renamed *Musée indo-chinois* in 1889 (Edwards, *Cambodge*, p. 32). He published his travel account with evocative drawings of the ruins, *Voyage au Cambodge: l’architecture Khmer* (Paris: Librairie Ch. Delagrave, 1880). Malleret considered this book a ‘pionnier, dans cette grande aventure de reconnaissance et d’exploration qui marque le premier aspect des recherches archéologiques en Indochine’ (‘Histoire abrégée de l’Archéologie Indochinoise’, 43-68 (p. 44)).

¹²² King, *Orientalism and Religion*, p. 147.

As early as Mouhot's writings, these overlapping attitudes to Decadence were reformulated as an anti-decadent moral lesson for the French: 'Engourdi par la mollesse et la servitude, [l'Orient moderne] dort insoucieux sur les ruines de l'Orient antique, ruines qui n'ont désormais d'éloquence et de leçon que pour les fils de l'Occident.' (p. 295). His prediction heralds the concretisation of this 'leçon' in the EFEO's archaeological and scholarly projects as well as the establishment of museums, not only in the *métropole* but also in the colony from the turn of the century onwards.¹²³ This anti-decadent stance is officially endorsed by Paul Doumer, who visited Angkor on his way to assuming his position as the Governor General of Indochina (1897-1902). Doumer was struck by Angkor's potential as a 'leçon de beauté et de grandeur' in relation to cultural decadence in general and for his own country's fate in particular: France has to 'employer tout ce que nous avons de force et d'énergie à empêcher que notre patrie [...] ne glisse sur la pente de la décadence où ne s'arrête que dans la ruine et la mort.'¹²⁴ His patriotic wish was to be materialised when Angkor Wat travelled back to the *métropole* in the form of grandiose replicas at various *Expositions*, with the 1931 Paris exhibition representing the apotheosis of the regenerated and regenerating empire for which Angkor was the perfect embodiment.

In a somewhat similar manner to the spiritual syncretistic project, Pourvoirville's ambivalent identificatory project can be seen as part of a wider realignment of the Greater French identity to incorporate Indochinese cultural heritage. Using the decadent Cambodian as a foil, France can redefine herself as an anti-decadent nation with both a racial and intellectual connection to the ancient past of Asia, yet also possessing the knowledge to

¹²³ Georges Groslier embodies *par excellence* this anti-decadent action. This 'Khmerophile' was the first Director of the *École des arts cambodgiens* in 1917 which he helped to reformulate from the *École royale des arts décoratifs* (founded in 1907) and also the curator of the *Musée Albert Sarraut* in Phnom Penh (opened in 1920). His Fine Arts School of Cambodia played a major role in the construction of the Angkor pavilions at the *Exposition coloniale* of 1922 in Marseille and 1931 in Paris. The notion of Decadence and Regeneration applied to the Khmer race has been explored as central to his reformulation of both traditional and contemporary Cambodian arts and traditions. See Gabrielle Abbe, "'Decadence and Revival' in Cambodian Arts and the Role of George Groslier (1887–1945)", in *Cultural Heritage as Civilizing Mission: From Decay to Recovery*, ed. by Michael Falser (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), pp. 123-47.

¹²⁴ *L'Indo-Chine française (souvenirs)* (Paris: Vuibert et Nony, 1905).

regenerate this heritage through modern tools, whether it is archaeology, museology or ethnography. This obsession with deciphering and managing the colonies' ancient monuments is a development of Orientalism that is highly political when considered against the background of inter-imperial rivalries between the French, British and Dutch over the domination of Asia. These rivalries play out not only in traditional military and economic realms (as we have seen for instance with the circumstances that led to the Franco-Siam treaty and the *entente cordiale*), but also, particularly at the turn of the century, in the cultural domain. This can be seen in the successive establishment of archaeological agencies in Asian colonies by these three imperial powers as well as the foundation of museums and world's fairs in Europe which increasingly exhibited ancient monuments and sculptures from these colonies as points of national pride.¹²⁵

Emulating his French characters' imperial gesture in reconstructing knowledge about the ruins, Pouvourville draws on his claim to ethnological and cultural authority as a *Français d'Asie* to construct a discourse of 'colonial historicism'. Indeed, this polymath also published a highly-praised study of Indochinese art, *L'Art indo-chinois*, after a mission sponsored by the *Ministère des Beaux Arts* in 1892 from which he brought back Indochinese art objects for France's Oriental art collections.¹²⁶

However, Pouvourville's epic metahistory, 'Le Roi Rouge', although marked by its historical ambitions, remains an imaginative account, drawing on folklore and legends. The prophecy announced by divine visitation as well as the *fantastique* presence of the snakes and the intertwining jackfruit tree around the statue can be compared with oral histories narrated

¹²⁵ The Dutch 'discovered' Borobudur, the world largest Buddhist temple, in Indonesia as early as 1814. The colonial Commission on Antiquities was established in 1901 to oversee the restoration of the stupa. In Burma, the ruins of Pagan started to be systematically restored with the foundation of the Burma Epigraphic Office in 1902 under British rule. For the foundation of archaeological agencies in Southeast Asian colonies, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, [1983] 2006), pp. 178-85. See also A. Noor Farish, *The Discursive Construction of Southeast Asia in 19th-Century Colonial-Capitalist Discourse* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

¹²⁶ *L'Art indo-chinois* (Paris: Librairies-imprimeries réunies, 1894). This monograph is considered 'unparalleled for decades in its comprehensiveness and sensitivity to the art of all regions of the colony', ultimately 'the first study of the visual and material culture of Indochina' (Deyasi, 'French Visual Culture and "Indochina"', p. 93).

by contemporary Cambodians recorded by explorers. Although often dismissed as mere fantasy, as well as being taken as a sign that modern Cambodia was not a nation in the modern sense because the Cambodians lacked positivist historical knowledge of their own past,¹²⁷ these legends fascinated literary writers. Not to mention that Pouvoirville deliberately dismisses the historical chronology of the Angkor city established by French scholars since the 1880s.

This deliberate gesture reflects the aesthetic desire to sustain the myth of the ruins' origin as lost in the *néant* of time. This can be read in the poetic pendant to the short story, 'Les Rouges' (1912).¹²⁸ Written 'Sous la Ruine Khmer' (p. 172), the two-part poem relates first the Red's ambition to record 'leur mémoire' (line 13) and, thus, a recognition of their empire as a nation: 'Leurs héros [...] / aux flancs de la patrie ont sculpté leur histoire' (lines 14-15). The second part depicts the fall of the empire and the destruction of the temples by 'L'inexorable Temps' (line 17) and nature. The poem ends by insisting on the idea of nothingness ('Rien ne fut fait pour l'âme, et rien ne reste aux yeux' (line 25)), genocide ('holocauste' (line 29)) and loss of memory. The ruins become an 'Anonyme déchet' (line 28). They emerge as the embodiment of the *néant* in which the decadence of the empire (along with the violent erasure of an entire race) appeals to the imagination of the poet and the reader as a moral lesson but also as an aesthetic yearning.

However, if Pouvoirville's narrative seems to endorse colonialist and racist discourses, it also presents some ambivalent aspects like those of many of his literary texts already discussed. In addition to the sympathetic and empathetic tone used to narrate the tragic fate of the indigenous people, the French explorer's excavations can be seen as a theft.

¹²⁷ See for example, Mouhot, 'Voyage', pp. 296 and 303-4.

¹²⁸ 'Les Rouges', in Pouvoirville, *Rimes d'Asie*, pp. 169-72. See Annex 9. The poem is dedicated to Elie and Jacques de Commaille. They might have been related to the EFEO scholar, Jean Commaille (1868-1916) who was appointed the first 'Conservateur' of the Angkor site in 1908, overseeing the conservation and restoration of the temples. With Lunet de Lajonquière (1861-1933), he established a list of conservation works to be undertaken, particularly those of Angkor Wat and Bayon, and played a major role in the burgeoning activities of the EFEO in Angkor.

By the 1910s, the need for the preservation of France's Indochinese *patrimoine* was already established with the EFEO acted as the archaeological stronghold of the region and Angkor as its jewel.¹²⁹ The failure to uproot the statue at the end of the story also renders problematic the apparent superiority of the French who possess both positivist knowledge and modern technology, reversing somewhat the power relations between these modern tools and indigenous belief.

This ambivalence in Pouvourville's literary account of the ruins reflects a contradiction in the discourse of ruins in the colonial literature of Indochina. Parallel to the 'imperial ruin gaze'¹³⁰ directed at the Angkor ruins, another trope of the ruins, more problematic, constantly appears as a backdrop of colonial literature, that is to say the 'colonial ruins'. These are the ruins that mark the Indochinese landscape and villages as well as culture and civilisation violated by the French conquest.

In Boissière's short story, 'Carnet d'un troupier' from *Fumeurs d'opium*, a French soldier in Tonkin passes a village in ruins: 'Et dès qu'on a dépassé le premier rideau d'arbres et de brousses, pour perdre de vue *les ruines* et la plaine rousse où pointent quelques silhouettes de fermes à l'abandon [...] Partout tristesse et désolation.' (p. 145. My Emphasis). Like ancient ruins, this modern ruinscape arouses nostalgia in the young Frenchman, but here it is of a kind that is specific to the wars of pacification. He finds a photo of a Chinese woman on the floor: 'Et, fermant les yeux, j'évoque les meurtres, les incendies, toutes les misères dont a souffert ce pays, et les rapt, et les viols aussi, dans l'horreur des couches de hasard, et je garde la frêle image, avec quelque émotion, comme une fleur qui aurait survécu à un cataclysme et que je cueillerais pour la placer dans mon portefeuille.' (p. 146) If the reader is at first led to believe that these ruins are caused by the 'pirates' and not the French

¹²⁹ From the 1900s, archaeologists and administrators sought to convert the site into an archaeological park for both conservation and tourism. By the 1920s, the site of Angkor city became known as the 'Angkor Park'.

¹³⁰ Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, *Ruins of Modernity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 169-92.

soldiers, the young soldier soon casts a doubt on the colonial term ‘pirate’: ‘Des groupes de “pirates”, ou – plus probablement – de propriétaires dépossédés, nous guettent de loin’.

Ruinscape and actual rape, this time Cambodian, instigated by the French reappear at the end of Claude Farrère’s *Les Civilisés*. During ‘la révolte du Grand Lac’ in Cambodia, the order is to ‘massacrer les pirates’ (p. 282, emphasis in the text). All civilians, including women and children, are exterminated while the French officer, Fierce, rapes a young girl against the background of ‘Le village incendié’ (p. 283), exposing colonial ruinscape as it is made in real time.

Pouvourville also evokes these modern ruins in another short story in the same volume as his Khmer tale. ‘La Leçon de l’empereur’ relates a story of an intercultural connection between the lonely child emperor kept under French control and the wife of his French teacher. The emperor is confined to his palace ‘dont la splendeur étouffait sa jeunesse et cachait la ruine de l’empire’ (p. 89). From the point of view of the native this time, in the short story ‘Mémoires de Thi-Vinh’, Clotilde Chivas-Baron’s female protagonist, Thi-Vinh, while travelling to the capital, Hué, sees ‘d’étranges visions, des visions de ruine, de deuil’ (p. 86).¹³¹ Her father explains that ‘ces ruines, ma fille, sont œuvres de Français’. Hence, while giving the main stage to the Angkor ruins, colonial literature of Indochina also sets up colonial ruinscape caused by the imperial wars as part of its backdrop, articulating a critical anti-colonial discourse.

More recently, in the wake of Western wars against terror, the trope of ruins has been reformulated in postcolonial scholarship as a critical tool for a re-examination of the ongoing repercussions of the colonial era, ‘the aftershocks of empire’, and ‘the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things’. Picking up on Fanon’s formulation of the Empire’s ruins as ‘des germes de pourriture’,¹³² these critics led by cultural

¹³¹ Clotilde Chivas-Baron, *Trois femmes annamites* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1922).

¹³² Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: La Découverte ‘Poche’, 2002), p. 239.

anthropologists seek to reframe post-colonial legacy by redefining ruins as ‘both the claim about the state of thing and a process affecting it’ or ‘ruination’ to tease out links between the on-going consequences of the empire in today’s societies.¹³³

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Representing ‘the site of intense aesthetic re-imagining, and political and economic appropriation’,¹³⁴ the Angkor ruins took their foundational imaginative form at the *fin de siècle*, with many traits that were to last until the present day as shown by recent scholarship on the subject of postcolonial Angkor. As we have seen, whether underlaid by decadent aesthetics (Droin) or cultural Decadence (Pouvoirville), literary Angkor is articulated in relation to the *néant oriental* with spiritual yearning as its all-pervasive feature and colonial historicism as its ultimate fantasy.

The allure of the *néant* embodied in the Khmer ruins and Far Eastern spiritualities is articulated through a double movement between Decadence and anti-Decadence. In contrast to opium and sexuality in which this double movement remains somewhat unresolved, the unsettling aspect of the Indochinese *néant* came to be increasingly perceived by French writers as a paradoxically regenerative force. It was thus recuperated after the turn of the century as part of the newly redefined boundaries of the French national and Greater identity. The decline of decadent aesthetics was henceforth set in motion.

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¹³³ Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 23 (2008), 191-219 pp. 194-5).

¹³⁴ Panivong Norindr, ‘The Fascination for Angkor Wat and the Ideology of the Visible’, in *Expressions of Cambodia: the Politics of Tradition, Identity, and Change*, ed. by Leakthina Chan-Pech Ollier and Tim Winter (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 54-70 (p. 54).

Epilogue

The Future of Decadence

In Graham Green's *The Quiet American* (1955), one can identify the key colonial tropes of opium (Fowler is an opium smoker), sexuality (embodied in the modern *congai*, Phoung) and spirituality (in the presence of the Cao Dai religion) in a modern form. These tropes are aligned with the radical political and social changes Indochina was undergoing in the late 1950s from decolonisation to the beginning of American involvement. This shows how powerful and all-pervasive the phantasmagoria of decadent Indochina were: constructed at the *fin-de-siècle*, they persisted long after the decline of Decadence in the early 1920s.

In *Decadent Indochina and French Colonial Literature, 1820s to 1920s*, I have attempted to reconstruct the genealogy of these colonial tropes in the literary imaginary, that is, how they were invented, reinvented and constantly 'recycled' not only within the colonial literature of Indochina, but also in the intersections of metropolitan and colonial literatures. I have argued that these tropes are inherently informed by *fin-de-siècle* Decadence in its two overlapping articulations, namely decadent aestheticism and cultural Decadence and, hence, have shown how they represent the newly conquered colony as decadent Indochina. By the same token, Decadence as it is played out in the unequal Franco-Indochinese encounter takes on a *colonial* identity, in contrast to the traditional view of it as a French and European-focused movement. Its inherently *political* side is also apparent, in contrast to what is sometimes, wrongly, seen as its detachment from contemporary material existence. Decadence is embedded within the colonial condition, albeit in ways that are problematic and ambivalent. I have thus tried to show that while Decadence abets France's superiority and reasserts the

neatly delineated boundaries that separate the coloniser from the colonised by representing the latter as racially degenerate and morally decadent, it also destabilises this colonialist delineation in its ambiguous propensity for wallowing in the Indochinese decay and Decadence that it condemns.

In the first chapter, opium, which represents one of the key themes linked to emerging literary modernity in the *métropole*, provides a point of entry into the colonial universe of decadent Indochina. By focusing on Paul Bonnetain's novel, Jules Boissière's and Claude Farrère's short stories, I have tried to show how Indochinese opium was articulated by these authors either as a mastering *tool* for the first French 'invaders' (opium seen as a panacea against the *mal du pays* as well as an initiation into the native culture) or a creative medium for aestheticism (for both coloniser and colonised). The topos belongs in fact to a double historicity. Represented as a timeless exotic commodity, Indochinese opium is also enmeshed in colonial politics, reflecting the political state into which Indochina was propelled by colonisation and globalisation. Its perceived hallucinatory and intellectual powers (often rendered through the *fantastique*) subject the boundaries of the French self to scrutiny, provoking an existential crisis (embodied in the figure of the *décivilisé* and that of the traumatised ex-colonial soldier) as well as an ontological breach that allows for a sense of fraternity with, or at least an invited opening towards, the colonised other. Through the close reading of various passages where these ontological and epistemological questionings come to the surface, I have argued that the temptation of decadent opium introduces an oppositional counter-narrative into colonial discourse and that this has been an inherent component of colonial literature of Indochina since its conception. As such, I have suggested that 'critical Decadence' is a key feature of Decadence seen as both symptom and reaction against metropolitan *and* colonial modernity.

The second chapter maps out an erotic cartography of French Indochina through three key figures associated with decadent sexual 'anarchy' in Indochina, namely the *femme*

fatale, the androgyne and the homosexual. I have foregrounded the question of race in its intersection with sexuality since unconventional sexualities and sexual practices in feminised Indochina are often racialised and pathologised as atavistic and hereditary, in tune with *fin-de-siècle* medical discourse and evolutionist views of the colonised peoples. More than opiate intoxication, erotic and carnal intercultural encounters in Indochina are revealed to be problematic for the bourgeois French rule which was established after the turn of the century following the end of the ‘*années incertaines*’ during the pacification.¹ What I have tried to demonstrate is the constant negotiations of the racial boundaries between coloniser and colonised through various degrees and forms of sexual intermixing. Framed within the decadent *and* colonial projects, the ambivalent attraction and repulsion of decadent erotic desire both re-inscribes the dominance of the colonising power and at the same time reveals the porosity and fragility of this dominance. Along with this boundary crossing, I have shown that decadent sexuality is also framed creatively, particularly in the case of Boissière and Pouvourville, as a means to address and redefine modern masculinity, re-inventing what is usually seen as perverse and decadent into a regenerative force while maintaining its subversive unorthodox potential. From this perspective, the decadent sexual project heralds the spiritual syncretic project examined in the last chapter. An example of self-reflexive Decadence is also analysed through Farrère’s parodic portrayal of a homosexual decadent coloniser who is represented both as a critique of metropolitan bourgeois morality and a caricature of the decadent posture.

Throughout these two chapters, I suggest that the tension between degeneration/Decadence and regeneration/anti-Decadence structures the dynamisms of the colonial literature of Indochina. This tension becomes even more central in the trope of the *néant oriental* examined in the last chapter. I have focused on the two interconnected

¹ Fourniau, *Vietnam. Domination coloniale et résistance nationale*, pp. 429-42.

embodiments of the *néant*: Buddhism and Far Eastern spiritualities, and the allure of the Khmer ruins. Both are linked to the *fin-de-siècle* fascination with mysticism and spiritualism, as well as reflecting the nineteenth-century obsession with history encouraged by the discoveries of extra-European ancient cultures and religions. They are to be understood in the context of the emergence of related discourses such as the occult revival, the concept of world religions, and developments in archaeology and museology. I have analysed the evolving trajectory within which the Far Eastern *néant* is articulated first through the decadent imagery of perversity and terrifying menace before being recuperated as an anti-decadent regenerative force by the desire for syncretism in both its religious and cultural forms. I have argued that this syncretic desire reflects an attempt to contribute to a redefinition of the 'Greater French' identity by appropriating Asian wisdom and past into the boundaries of 'la plus grande France' in line with the refashioning of these authors as belonging to the new identity of the *Français d'Asie*. I ended the chapter by suggesting that this identificatory strategy heralds the decline of Decadence in favour of a more objective vein of colonial literature that was to be promoted by its theorists from the 1910s onwards.

* * * * *

Decadence, as it is played out in *fin-de-siècle* colonial literature of Indochina through these key themes, is constantly marked by ambivalence. As a cultural concept, cultural Decadence, in the colonial context, is malleably articulated through a double postulation: 1) Europe is decadent and hence needs to colonise to rejuvenate its virile energy 2) Europe is virile and civilised, hence needs to civilise primitive races. In tune with this double articulation, Indochina and its people are ambivalently represented as decadent and over-civilised *and/or* primitive and under-civilised. In both views, anti-Decadence is aligned with the regenerative and philanthropic discourse underlining colonisation seen as a response to European *and* Indochinese decadence.

However, as an aesthetics, while re-inscribing this colonialist and racialist ideology as well as co-opting anti-decadent elements within its aesthetic project, decadent aestheticism more often than not provokes oppositional dissidences due to its inherent ambiguities. Its contradictory attitude – at once fascination and condemnation – *vis-à-vis* the temptation of decadent Indochina enables a criss-crossing of the neatly drawn boundaries between coloniser and colonised (and their reciprocal culture and worldview along with it) in such a problematic way that both can be seen simultaneously – and at times positively – as Decadents, provoking a radical questioning of what it means to be French, European, and coloniser *and* Indochinese, Asian and colonised.

What I have termed ‘critical Decadence’ is characterised by this inherent potential of Decadence to disrupt colonialist ideology, enabling a questioning of racial and cultural difference and provoking an epistemological breach in the West’s confidence in its all-conquering knowledge and power. This breach occurs within the specific historical context of colonisation where maintaining of boundaries was essential to French and European rule. Decadence in the colonial context or ‘colonial Decadence’ can thus be seen as a historical and aesthetic form of criticism of, at times resistance to, colonialism.

As a ‘travelling concept’ in Said’s theorisation, colonial Decadence draws on metropolitan Decadence in its revolt against bourgeois norms, its fetishisation of perversity as well as the acute self-reflexivity of its aestheticist posture; it also politicises this metropolitan-based posture to address key aspects of the Franco-Indochinese colonial encounter. This overtly political aestheticism gives an extra-European colonial identity to the pan-European decadent movement.

While I have organised the chapters according to the themes, my close analysis of the primary texts has attempted to address various narrative modes that can be said to represent generic tendencies adopted by colonial Decadence. This includes the *fantastique*; the ethnologically-oriented tale inspired by the native legends and folklore; short stories; and,

last but perhaps the most characteristic, poetry. This generic and stylistic variety suggests the extent to which Decadence as a travelling concept adapts and enriches its mode of expression to incorporate what is specific about the new geographical reality. The production and recycling of exotic stereotypes and clichés to their saturation point also represent another key feature of Decadence which can be seen as evidence of Decadence's self-parody as well as the sentiment of belatedness symptomatic of colonial modernity in which exotic difference itself is doomed to disappear. Within the context of a globalised world, even a faraway tropical land like Indochina undergoes modernisation and homogenisation generated by colonial contact. Decadence's insistence on the hackneyed nature of exoticism suggests a very modernist attitude of self-reflexivity that is revealed to be even more prominent through the process of displacement, repositioning and transplantation of metropolitan Decadence into the colonial condition.

* * * * *

By demonstrating the complex ways in which Decadence is strategically deployed by French authors in their fiction of Indochina and by situating it within the cultural, sociological, intellectual and political context of *fin-de-siècle* France and global inter-imperial rivalries, I have shown that the colonial literature of Indochina, particularly during its early period, is multifarious and characterised by complexity, nuances and even contradictions in its ideological position *vis-à-vis* colonialism. Even in the most overtly pro-colonial texts, a potential oppositionality seems to be suggested in passages articulated through decadent attitude and aesthetics. This contradicts the contemporary critical view dominant in postcolonial criticism that tends to portray a monolithic pro-colonial view of colonial literature. This postcolonial posture is symptomatic of the influence of Said's conception of Orientalism, though Said, in his discussion of Flaubert and Nerval, hints at the potential disruption of Orientalism the French authors instilled in their writing, which 'consciously plays with the limitations and the challenges presented to them by the Orient and by

knowledge about it.² As such, while the postcolonial strategy of using colonial literature as a foil to examine postcolonial literature as resistance is useful, it nonetheless fails to address in a *longue durée* perspective the more nuanced and complex view pertaining to the legacies – whether it be continuation, rupture or reconfiguration – of the colonial era. Postcolonial themes and preoccupations such as *métissage*, hybridity and resistance as well as the on-going process of imperial ‘ruination’³ at work in contemporary literary, cultural and political practices gain a greater critical perspective when read comparatively with an awareness of colonial culture.

On the other hand, by postcolonising colonial literature in its relation to Decadence, I hope to partake in the re-evaluation of the study of colonial literature by moving it away from nostalgia for the luxuriant colonial life in the tropics which seems to have recently resurfaced in the publishing and bibliophilic spheres. Following the nostalgic revival of colonial Indochina in the late twentieth century in France,⁴ a more critical and nuanced awareness has been put forward by republications of French colonial literature concerning Indochina and the Far East, notably through the work of Kailash Editions (located in Pondicherry and Paris), particularly their series ‘Les Exotiques’, and the series ‘Autrement même’ (in Paris) at L’Harmattan, and in English by White Lotus (in Thailand) and DatAsia Press (in the United States), though the latter’s republications seem the least critical of colonial blues. Within this renewal of interest in colonial Indochina, the needs for an awareness of the colonial agenda underpinning the texts as well as a re-evaluation of the colonial imagination against postcolonial concerns is even more apparent.

² Said, *Orientalism*, p. 181.

³ Ann Laura Stoler proposes to replace the term ‘legacies’ with ‘imperial ruins’ or ‘ruination’ to put an emphasis on the on-going repercussions of colonialism on contemporary societies (*Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, and ‘Imperial Debris’, 191-219). Charles Forsdick’s re-examination of the complex and shifting concept of colonial exoticism for postcolonial criticism provides an example of this critical revision (Travelling Concepts: Postcolonial Approaches to Exoticism’, *Paragraph*, 24 (2001), 12-29 and *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Cultures* (Oxford University Press, 2005)).

⁴ This is particularly visible in Jean-Jacques Arnaud’s film adaptation of Marguerite Duras’s novel, *L’Amant* (1984), its English version, *The Lover* (1992) and Régis Wargnier’s *Indochina* (1992). See in particular, Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina*, pp. 131-54.

* * * * *

By combining colonial discourse analysis with postcolonial and cultural studies approaches, supplemented by a historicist approach, I hope to contribute to scholarship on French and modern colonial history that explores the extent to which narratives about the colonised reveal the coloniser's 'phantasmagoria' concerning the subjects under their domination as well as their own hopes, dreams, fear and uncertainties. In examining earlier literary writings, I aim to complete the scholarship of colonial Indochina that has hitherto concentrated on the more well-known French writers such as Marguerite Duras and André Malraux as well as later populist writers such as Jean Hougron.

At the same time, this thesis has tried to open up reflections on the significant role of Decadence outside its centre and within a wider global context. This critical stance is in line with a resurgence of Decadence studies, and particularly, the transnational and transtemporal view of Decadence as argued by critics such as Regenia Gagnier and Robert Stilling. Working towards the breaking down of the neat boundaries between the *métropole* and the empire by virtue of Decadence's transgressivity and playfulness, my thesis resonates particularly with Stilling's cogent study of the appropriation of *fin-de-siècle* metropolitan Decadence in Anglophone postcolonial poetry.⁵ When looking at the literature of French colonial Indochina, we may see that this postcolonial appropriation of Decadence's critical and oppositional tools was already the subject of some degree of experimentation in colonial times. This is not to mention the possible connection – in all its forms from recuperation to rejection – between French colonial literature (and its decadent aestheticism) and postcolonial Vietnamese literature, that remains yet to be explored. Understanding colonial Decadence might help us think critically and comparatively about transnational and postcolonial Decadence, or in other words, a Decadence that has been undergoing constant

⁵ Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*.

processes of transplantation, appropriation and transformation since it began to travel globally at its emergence at the *fin de siècle*.

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Figures



Figure 1 'Un vice nouveau: les fumeries d'opium en France', *Le Petit Journal. Supplément du Dimanche* (5th July 1903)



Figure 2 Paul Bonnetain, *La Vie populaire* (4 October 1888)



Figure 3 Jules Boissière (1863-1897)



Figure 4 A pavillion of Angkor Wat in Henri Mouhot's 'Voyage dans les royaumes de Siam, de Cambodge, de Laos, et autres plaines centrales de l'Indo-Chine' (1863). Source gallica.bnf.fr/BNF



Figure 5 Angkor Wat in Henri Mouhot's 'Voyage dans les royaumes de Siam, de Cambodge, de Laos, et autres plaines centrales de l'Indo-Chine' (1863). Source gallica.bnf.fr/BNF



Figure 6 Gustave Moreau, *Salomé dansant devant Hérode* (1876)
Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA



Figure 7 Eugène Delacroix, *La Mort de Sardanapale* (1827)
Musée du Louvre



Figure 8 Pouvoirville as a young officer after his first campaign and under the name of Matgioi alongside Nguyen Van Cang, in Jean-Pierre Laurant, *Matgioi: un aventurier taoïste* (1982)



Figure 9 Liu Yongfu or Ong-Luu (1837-1917)

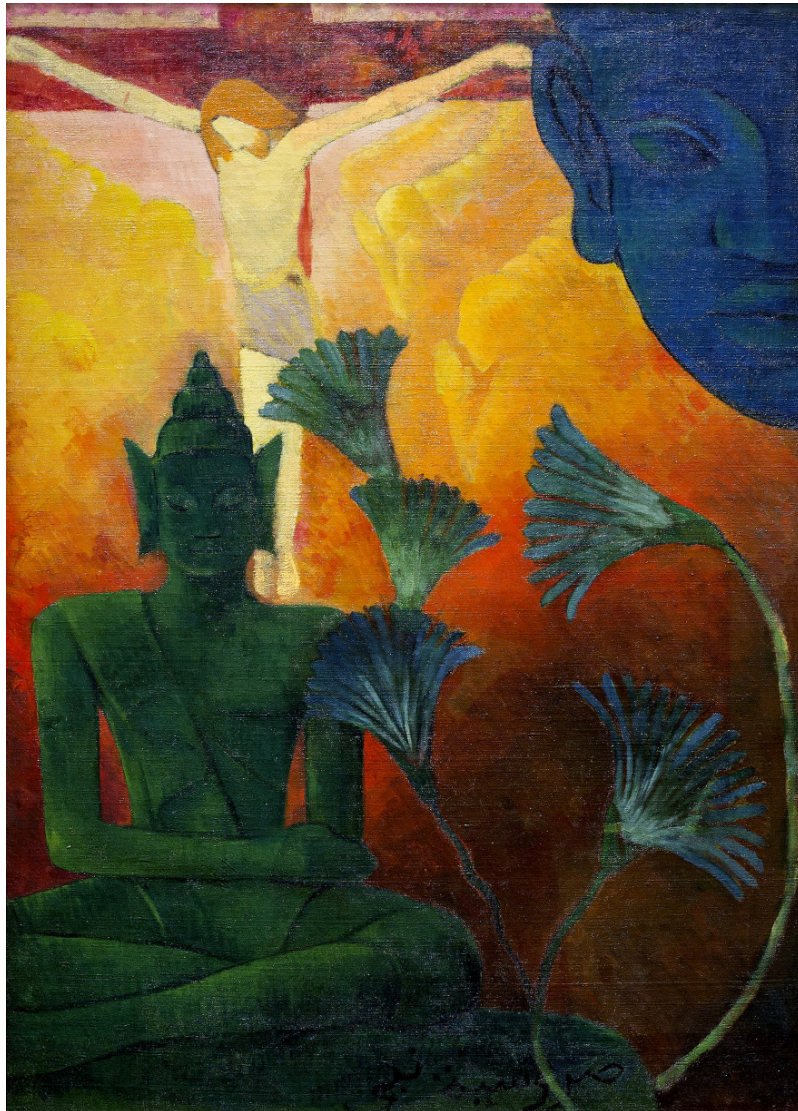


Figure 10 Paul Ranson, *Christ et Bouddha* (circa 1890)
The Kunstmuseum, The Hague, The Netherlands

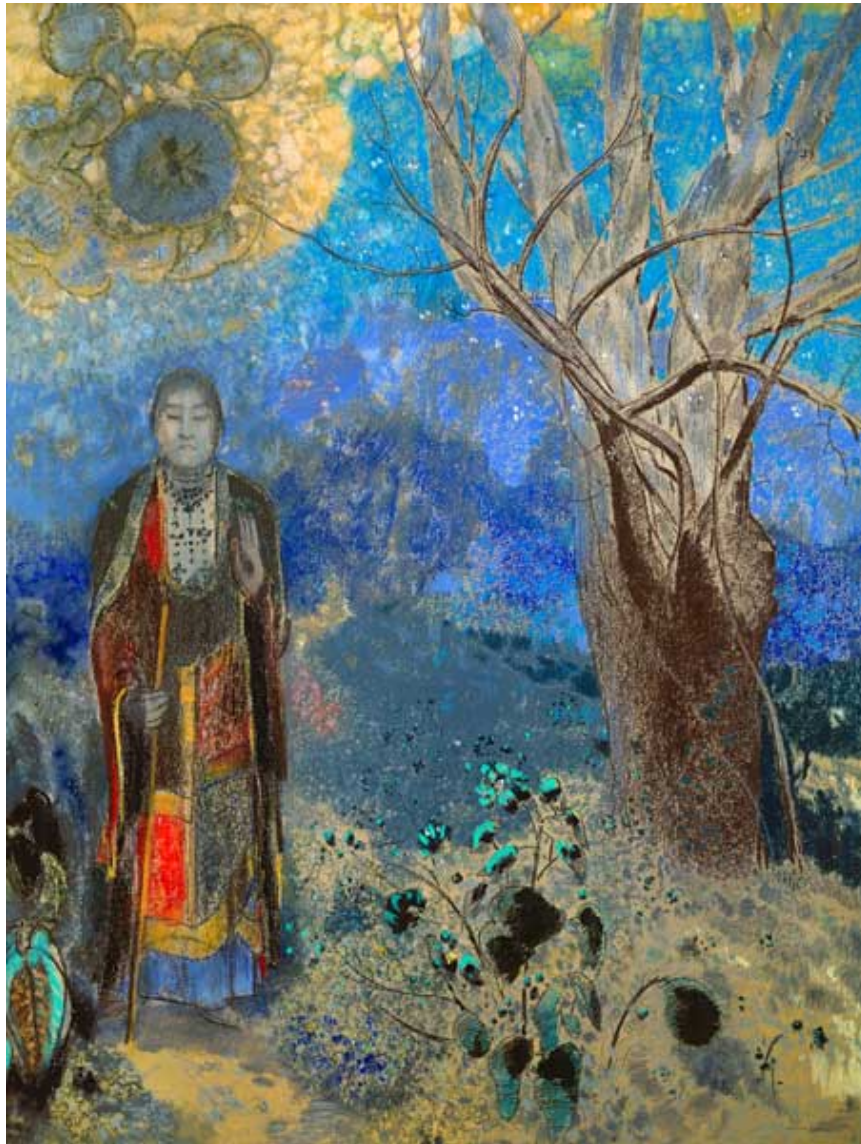


Figure 11 Odilon Redon, *Bouddha* (circa 1906-7)
Musée d'Orsay



Figure 12 The illustrator Albert Cézard, a member of the *Français d'Asie* in his Hanoi studio, in Pouvoirville, 'Les Français d'Asie' (*La Dépêche coloniale*, 31 July 1909)



Figure 13 Bayon, the second cover of Louis Delaporte's *Voyage au Cambodge* (1880). Source gallica.bnf.fr/BNF



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 14 'Les danseuses cambodgiennes du roi Sisowath à Paris' (Agence Meurisse). Source gallica.bnf.fr/BNF

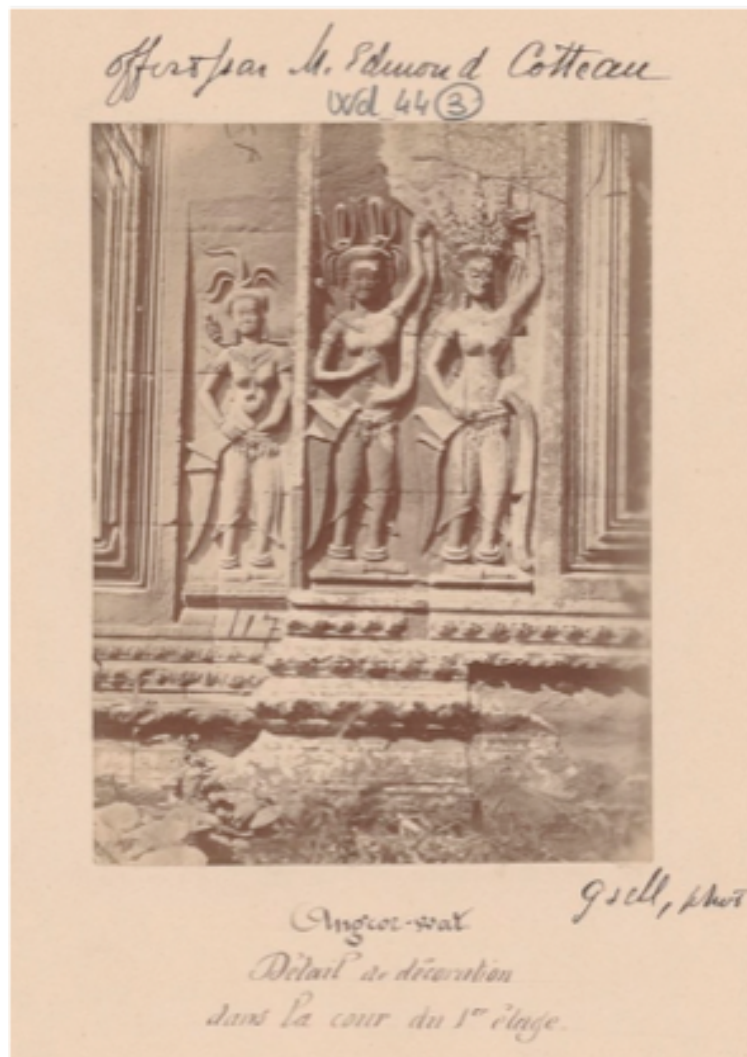


Figure 15 The Apsaras at Angkor Wat, photograph by Émile Gsell (before 1886). Source gallica.bnf.fr/BNF

Annex

Annex 1: 'Un vice nouveau: Fumerie d'opium en France'

Published on the back cover of *Le Petit Journal. Supplément du Dimanche* (5th July 1903)

Un vice épouvantable, spécial, jusqu'à ces dernières années, aux peuples et aux habitants de l'Extrême-Orient, tend de plus en plus à se répandre en France où nous n'avions cependant guère besoin de cette nouvelle calamité. Il est important de le signaler à l'Opinion (*sic*) publique et d'en montrer hautement le danger. *Le Petit Journal* ne pouvait manquer à ce devoir patriotique. Cherbourg, Toulon et d'autres villes du littoral méditerranéen, Paris même, possèdent maintenant des fumeries d'opium, qui se cachent encore, comme honteuses de leur existence sur notre sol. Ce vice, si dangereux pour la santé physique, morale et intellectuelle de notre race, a été importé en France par quelques fonctionnaires coloniaux, qui l'ont pris à leurs administrés. Pour occuper leurs trop nombreux loisirs dans les postes lointains, ils ont pris peu à peu, par désœuvrement, l'habitude d'entrer dans ces repaires immondes où s'absorbent en fumée la folie et la mort. Comme les chinois ou les Annamites, nos compatriotes ont pris goût au plaisir de tremper la longue aiguille dans le poison qui, chauffé doucement au feu de la petite lampe, se dépose ensuite dans la pipe et s'aspire en une bouffée, procurant une extase d'une idéalité contestable, mais d'un danger certain. Dans les intervalles de lucidité, on voit les victimes de l'opium se traîner, le regard vague, éteint, la peau jaunâtre, comme séchée et collée aux pommettes des joues. L'heure du congé ayant sonné, on a espéré que le retour en France arrêterait l'œuvre du poison. Erreur! L'habitude était invétérée et, d'ailleurs, d'abominables mercantis qu'une loi sévère devrait, pendant qu'il en est temps encore, pourchasser impitoyablement et éloigner de notre territoire, ne demandaient qu'à l'encourager pour en tirer profit. De là, l'ouverture de ces fumeries d'opium clandestines à Paris même et dans quelques-unes de nos villes du littoral. Notre vieille race, déjà si affaiblie, avait bien besoin de ce vice nouveau!

Annex 2: Jules Boissière, 'La con-gai' (1887), in Victor Le Lan, *Essai sur la littérature coloniale* (Hanoi: Cahier Indochinois, 1907), p. 16-17

- 1 Ta chair fraîche d'esclave est savoureuse et saine,
 Et l'aine de carmin frissonne sous la chair
 Du ventre dur, poli comme la porcelaine,
 Bouclier triomphal éblouissant et clair;
- 5 – Au cœur des Béatrix je préfère l'ivoire
 Lucide de tes seins faits en forme de poire,
 Avec leur pointe rose et rigide dans l'air.
- Mais plus que tout cela me plaît ta chevelure,
 Lorsque ta maigre main, par un geste brutal,
- 10 Jusqu'aux jambes d'éphèbe à la ligne si pure,
 La déploie et secoue une odeur de santal
 Et de musc, fastueuse et lourde, par la chambre,
 Tandis que les colliers de jade, d'or et d'ambre
 Tintent clair sur tes seins, comme un bris de cristal.
- 15 La femme, en souriant, roule autour de l'aiguille
 L'opium qui se gonfle à l'action du feu;

Et j'aime comme un fou ce sourire de fille
Sous le regard éteint d'un ivrogne ou d'un Dieu;
Car, tandis que le pli des lèvres me rassure,
20 Plein d'appels prometteurs d'amour et de luxure,
J'ai peur de ce regard noir, vague, sans aveu.

Et c'est de tout cela que mon amour se forge,
Des sourires plissant la muqueuse en velours,
Des cheveux, d'un très doux roucoulement de gorge,
25 Et du vif cliquetis de ses bijoux trop lourds;
Et peut-être, surtout, de la morne épouvante
Que verse à mon esprit sa prunelle savante
Et son regard voilé mystérieux toujours.

Elle est naïvement et mignonement laide;
30 Elle vient, en riant de son rire félin,
Lascive, sur mon cou, frôler sa nuque tiède
Avec une tendresse exquise d'orphelin.
J'ai, quand elle frémit sous ma main, en silence,
Le plaisir que la crainte a rendu plus intense
35 De caresser un tigre effrayant et câlin.

Enfant respectueux toujours de ce que j'aime,
Sphinx impassible qui n'interroge jamais
Et dont le seul regard me pose son problème,
N'as-tu pas deviné, dis-moi, que je t'aimais
40 D'un amour de blasé des jours de décadence,
D'un amour que la crainte a rendu plus intense,
N'as-tu pas deviné, lorsque je frissonnais?

À l'heure vespérale où ma lampe s'allume,
Douce, silencieuse, esclave du lettré.
45 Tu ne tardes jamais à relever ma plume,
Tu ne déplaces pas le bouquin préféré:
O fille de l'Annam, tu respectes le Livre.
Et ton œil de mystique est satisfait de suivre
Les caractères saints sur le papier sacré.

50 Salut, fille aux yeux noirs de race inférieure,
Idéale féminin, toi qui n'exaltes pas;
Puisque je te choisis, ma part est la meilleure:
J'oublierai les catins de France dans tes bras;
Et dans ma quiétude, obstiné volontaire,
55 Je t'aurai, sans vouloir déchiffrer ton mystère,
Pas plus que l'ironie aux lèvres des Bouddhas.

Annex 3: René Creyssac, 'La congai', in *Sous les flamboyants*, (Hanoi: n. pub., 1913), p. 44.

A Émile Nolly.

Des baisers de ventouse où
s'engouffraient nos âmes...
(J. Lorrain)

- 1 Congai, monstre simiesque à la fausse indolence,
'Prodige de luxure et de duplicité,
Vivant mensonge, fleur de chaude volupté
Qui, sur le fumier d'or des vices, te balances,
- 5 Sphinx aux dents noires, au nez plat, aux cheveux rances,
Reine de stupre et de la froide cruauté,
Tu courbes sous ton joug tous les mâles, domptés
Par le charme envoûteur d'une infernale science.
- 10 O sœur du doux opium, adorable vampire,
Viens venger sur les Blancs le vieil Annam, aspire
Nos énergies, brise nos reins, vide nos cœurs,
- Et quand tu nous verras détraqués, gâteux, flasques,
Sur nos ruines fais claquer, jetant tout masque,
L'impitoyable fouet de ton rire moqueur!

Annex 4: Albert de Pouvourville, 'La Déesse', *Rimes d'Asie* (Paris: E. Figuière, 1912), pp. 93-4

Pour le Maître Nguyen the Duc

- 1 Androgyne muet et blanc qui nous écoutes,
Blanc comme l'œil des morts et le poil des vieillards,
Quang-Am, dieu du destin, déesse des hasards,
Guide au seuil des déserts, phare au tournant des routes,
- 5 Face d'argent, cœur de néant, corps de brouillards,
Lumière des chercheurs, archange des déroutés:
Tu fais battre nos cœurs et baisser nos regards,
Soleil des nuits, Œil des ténèbres, Clef des doutes.
- O statue, enterrée au seuil glacé des Mages,
- 10 Énigme de métal, ta quadruple beauté,
Debout à la naissance et à la fin des âges,
Sous ton sourire aigu détient la vérité;
- Et, dans ton indolence et ta virginité,
Le mystère ambigu de tes quatre visages
D'un amour immortel étreint l'humanité.

(Devant la porte de Tam-dzon)

Annex 5: Alfred Droin, 'Sur un Bouddha du Laos', *La Jonque victorieuse* (Paris: Charpentier, 1906), pp. 131-37

À Fernand Gregh

- 1 Sur ma table, parmi mes livres, il sourit,
D'un sourire multiple où la pensée abonde:
Le sourire qui flotte autour de la Joconde,
Le même, la clarté visible de l'Esprit!
- 5 Il a la taille et la poitrine d'une femme,
Mais son front est comme une cime, et sur ses yeux
Qui bombent puissamment leurs globes spacieux,
Ses paupières sont les rideaux lourds de son âme.
- 10 Son pagne laisse à nu son sein gauche, et l'on voit,
Resplendissante sur l'élégance du buste,
S'arrondir noblement une gorge robuste
Enfermant l'infini dans un contour étroit.
- 15 La courbe de ses brase enchante. Ce Dieu mêle
À sa divinité le charme féminin,
Et son visage omniscient, quoique bénin,
Masque de sa douceur l'énigme universelle.
- 20 Pendant des siècles, il respira de l'encens,
Dans la pagode antique où mes mains de barbare
Le ravirent, parmi l'opulence bizarre
Des métaux et des fruits qu'on offrait en présents.
- Pendant des siècles, chez un peuple doux et sage,
À l'heure consacrée où flambait l'aloès,
Son clair sourire, asiatique népenthès,
Par un calme divin récompensa l'hommage.
- 25 Au milieu de l'horreur mouvante des forêts,
Ce Dieu de bronze ayant pour prêtre le Silence
Berça l'âme dans le hamac de l'indolence,
Et la tint suspendue au bord des grands secrets.
- 30 Il était vêtu d'or, et sa figure ronde
Illuminait les fronts comme un soleil levant;
Sur sa bouche pesait un mutisme émouvant:
Sa science immobile équilibrait le monde.

* * *

- 35 Or voici au'aujourd'hui, moi, fils de l'Occident,
Tourmenté par le ciel autant que par la femme,
O Bouddha du Laos, pacificateur d'âme,
Vers ton socle de fer j'élève un cœur d'ardent !

- 40 Moi qui suis déchiré par un double martyr,
 Le mal métaphysique et le mal de l'amour;
 Moi qui sens dans ma chair le bec de ce vautour,
 Le Désir, ô Bouddha, j'implore ton sourire!
- Je suis né sous le cieus glacés des hommes blancs,
 Près des fleuves domptés traînant une onde sale,
 Dans des cités de pierre où le soleil est pâle,
 Où la vie irritée a d'impuissants élans.
- 45 Là, dans le tourbillon fiévreux des éphémères,
 J'exerçai ma pensée à déchirer mon cœur;
 Et, suçant âprement le sein de la Douleur,
 J'habituai ma lèvre aux voluptés amères.
- 50 C'est là que mon orgueil, dans un clairon d'airain,
 Me sonna le rappel qui promet la victoire;
 Ceint d'audace, je pris mon élan vers la Gloire:
 Malheur! Je tombai sous son glaive souverain!
- 55 Puis je bus des poisons compliqués: dans les livres,
 Et sur ta bouche, ô femme, ardemment, j'aspirai,
 Défaillant d'un bonheur que je croyais sacré,
 La mauvaise liqueur dont les hommes sont ivres.
- 60 Tumultueuse ainsi que la mer sous le vent,
 Sous mon front inquiet s'agitait ma pensée,
 Et mes jours, qu'entraînait une ronde insensée,
 Étaient comme les grains secoués dans un van.
- Pour trouver le repos, je lus les philosophes,
 Mais leur cœur orageux épouvantant le mien,
 Des poètes bientôt j'implorai le soutien;
 Hélas! d'après sanglots résonnaient sans leurs strophes!
- 65 Et l'Art, l'Art immortel, servant de la Douleur,
 Au lieu de m'apaiser par de calmes symboles,
 Magnifiant mon mal sous d'illustres coupoles,
 Faisait crier le marbre et souffrir la couleur.
- 70 Alors, j'interrogeai les prêtres, dans des temples
 Où l'air était plus froid que celui des tombeaux,
 Où, parmi l'or épars de multiples flambeaux,
 Jusqu'au faite, les murs s'illuminaient d'exemples.
- 75 Et voici que je vis, fantôme décevant,
 Le Dieux crucifié sur le front de ma race,
 Et tant d'horreur, hélas! palpait sur sa face
 Que pour moi son cadavre était encor vivant.
- O Bouddha, dans ce Dieu souffrait encore tout l'homme;

Baigné de pleurs, souillé de noirs caillots épais,
 Peut-être aspirait-il, comme moi, vers ta paix,
 80 Ta paix où l'Absolu se dévoile et se nomme.

Entends donc, ô Bouddha, mes cris désespérés!
 Calme le feu qui brûle en mon sang catholique!
 Ton icône sera ma suprême relique!
 J'allumerai pour toi les bâtonnets sacrés.

85 Tes bonzes m'apprendront à cadencer mes gestes,
 Aux sons graves du gong, près de l'encens fumant;
 Ton nom sera pour moi l'unique talisman;
 Je t'offrirai la fleur de mes espoirs célestes.

Apostat ébloui par un culte nouveau,
 90 Je me prosternerai sur le sol des pagodes,
 Et tandis que vers toi s'envoleront les odes,
 Un vertige divin troublera mon cerveau.

Libre de l'idéal qui l'avait asservie,
 Ma pensée, immobile au fond de mes yeux clos,
 95 Sera comme un lotus endormi sur les flots;
 Dans l'immuable paix j'immergerai ma vie,

O Bouddha du Laos, dieu de sérénité,
 Affranchis-moi du Christ dont je suis la victime,
 Et que je goûte enfin la sagesse sublime,
 100 Au bord de ton sourire et de l'éternité!

Annex 6: Alfred Droin, 'Sur un Bouddha rituel', *La Jonque victorienne* (Paris: Charpentier, 1906), pp. 81-82

À Victor Émile Michelet

1 Il a l'air de sourire, et sa droite est dressée,
 Mais, s'il ne parle pas, qu'importe? Car les mots
 Sur sa bouche abondante ont fait couler leurs flots,
 Jadis, – et sa doctrine en nos cœurs est fixée.

5 Il suffit qu'il soit là, la paupière abaissée
 Hiératiquement figé dans le repos,
 Et, le chef bossué d'une chape d'umbos,
 Résorbant l'univers en sa calme pensée.

Frère aîné de Jésus par l'immense douceur
 10 Il est assis au centre embaumé de la Fleur,
 Le lotus immortel qui rend l'âme féconde.

Or tout vivant qui souffre en la chair ou l'esprit
 Est guéri, s'il connaît la loi qu'il nous apprend:
 'Confronte ta douleur à la douleur du monde.'

Annex 7: Alfred Droin, 'Spiritus', *La Jonque victorieuse* (Paris: Charpentier, 1906), pp. 171-96

[p. 171]

Au capitaine Billès

[p. 172 – blank page]

[p. 173]L'âme languit et meurt de sa propre beauté!

Le monde est trop étroit pour contenir nos rêves,
 Qui, pareils aux flots sur les grèves,
 Sur les rivages bas de la réalité,
 Font sonner jusqu'aux cieux leur musique éternelle.

Inaccessible au cœur, la Beauté nous appelle,
 Et nous force à lever vers l'azur notre front.
 L'univers lui compose un multiple visage.
 Les dieux que nous créons sont pour elle un hommage:
 C'est vers sa majesté que tous les encens vont.

Les forêts, l'océan, les soirs et les aurores,
 Les coteaux dessinant sur le ciel des amphores
 [p. 174]Où se suspend l'écharpe onduleuse de l'air;
 Les fleuves amollis qui glissent vers la mer,
 Comme l'amant s'incline aux bras de son amante;
 Les fleurs, toutes les fleurs dont la grâce émouvante
 Étoile de regards l'ombre de nos chemins,
 Ou fleurit les buissons de sourires humains;
 Les formes, les couleurs, les rayons, les arômes,
 Mirage universel où dansent les atomes:
 Tout cela, c'est la robe innommable, ô Beauté,
 Qui nous cache ton corps et ta divinité!

Contempteurs de leur siècle alourdi de matière,
 Les poètes qui sont les voyants du divin,
 Derniers prêtres promis aux hommes de demain,
 Entraînés par l'élan de leur pensée altière,
 Au vent de l'infini, s'en vont, loin des cités,
 T'offrir le riche encens des rêves exaltés.
 Or, parfois, répondant à l'appel de ces sages,
 À l'heure où le matin dore les paysages,
 Où lorsque le couchant empourpre les forêts,
 Les yeux magiquement constellés de secrets,
 [p. 175]Et plus lointaine encor qu'est pour l'âme une autre âme,
 Découpant sur l'azur ta sveltesse de femme,
 Surnaturelle et pâle, ô Beauté, tu parais.

Malheur à celui-là qui vit l'âme du monde,
 L'impalpable Beauté, multiple comme l'onde,
 Lui sourire un matin sur l'émail bleu des mers,
 Ou sur votre miroir incandescent, déserts!
 Tourmenté par l'amour d'un visage ineffable,

Celui-là poursuivra toujours l'impossédable:
 Il n'aura pour amis que les grands horizons,
 Les plus vastes cités lui seront des prisons;
 Il vivra loin de l'homme, exilté volontaire,
 Le visage tourné du côté du mystère.
 Ses pieds fatigueront des chemins inconnus,
 Et toujours, à jamais, des désirs éperdus
 Enfonçant dans sa chair l'acier de mille glaives,
 Il cherchera partout la forme de ses rêves.

C'est pourquoi Spiritus, sur un bateau chinois,
 Remonte le Mékhong cambodgien. Les mois
 [p. 176] Du soleil homicide et des mangues dorées
 Se sont enfuis, pareils aux flamants migrateurs:
 C'est novembre. Un vent frais caresse les rameurs,
 Et voici qu'à Pnom-Penh les danseuses sacrées,

Pour la fête des eaux, dans le Palais-Royal,
 Ajustent sur leurs corps leur robe de métal;
 Puis, le chef surmonté du mukuta conique,
 Les genoux écartés, yeux mi-clos, gestes tors,
 Suspendent leur sveltesse à d'indolents accords,
 Vivantes visions d'un ballet symbolique.

Spiritus enivré par le ciel, l'air et l'eau,
 Sous le toit de bambous qui couvre le bateau,
 S'allonge mollement et savoure sa joie:
 Il est pâle, et son corps paraît frêle et souffrant,
 Mais, sous la large ampleur d'un front de conquérant,
 Son regard, double éclair, dans de l'azur flamboie.

Son sourire est celui d'un enfant; sa douceur,
 Quand il parle, s'épanche en murmure berceur,
 [p. 177] Tel un bruit de rameaux secouant leur rosée.
 Il est jeune, et pourtant, sur ses tempes, déjà,
 Une neige impalpable et précoce neigea,
 Car l'homme vieillit vite aux bras de la pensée.

Alchimiste du rêve au génie imprudent,
 On devine qu'il fit, sous le ciel d'Occident,
 Fondre les idéals dans le brasier de l'âme;
 Philosophe et poète, au creux de ses deux mains,
 Jadis il sentit fuir tous les savoirs humains,
 Eau vaine où son esprit croyait calmer sa flamme.

On le disait athée, et pourtant il aimait
 Les cierges, les encens, les soirs pieux de mai,
 Lorsque femmes et fleurs parfument les églises,
 Et qu'entre des murs froids brûlent des cœurs ardents;
 Les saints, *s'ils étaient beaux*, étaient ses confidents,
 Et sa pensée avait la liberté des brises.

De ce monde et de l'autre, il ne redoutait rien:
Il riait de l'enfer, mais il croyait au bien.

[p. 178] Et le surnaturel, comme un hôte invisible,
Il se sentait plus proche et plus vivant en lui
Que dans les paradis où la foi nous conduit.
Un lys l'émouvait plus qu'un verset de la Bible.

Les marbres, les tableaux, la musique, les vers,
Étaient pour lui le vrai, le réel univers,
L'habitable des corps n'étant qu'une apparence:
Il aimait la Joconde avec un cœur d'amant,
Et gardait son image ainsi qu'un talisman.
La musique faisait sourire sa souffrance.

Il adorait la femme, et vivait sans amour,
Sanglotant, et, et par toi, rongé jour après jour,
Désir, guêpe attachée au fruit mur de la vie!
Ses sens hurlaient de faim comme les loups, l'hiver,
L'idéal de son âme, étranger à sa chair,
Planant toujours plus haut, d'une aile inasservie.

Les hommes le froissaient par le langage vain.
Spiritus auprès d'eux semblait toujours lointain:
[p. 179] Il ne pouvait parler que de choses célestes.
Certains le croyaient fou, car, près des flots, le soir,
Alors que le jour mort s'enlinceulait de noir,
Il récitait des vers qu'accompagnaient ses gestes.

Le poète, un matin, volontaire banni,
Se sentant à jamais l'époux de l'infini,
S'élança tout joyeux vers le ciel des Tropiques:
Un vaisseau l'emporta, trépidant de vapeur.
C'est ainsi qu'aujourd'hui nous le voyons, songeur,
Remonter le Mekhong vers les pays bouddhiques.

* * *

Le Mekhong a conquis la plaine et la forêt:
"O Fleuve qui descends de ton berceau secret
Par le rude escalier des cascades géantes,
Toi pour qui le Laos fait brûler des encens
Sur des autels chargés de vœux et de présents
Toi, l'idole liquide aux écailles vivantes ;
[p. 180] Au sortir du couloir des monts cyclopéens,
Bondis au pays Khmer où les dieux anciens
Se survivent dans la majesté des statues!
Que les quatre horizons soient baignés par tes eaux,
Mekhong! Que ta largeur fatigue les oiseaux!

Jaloux de posséder la terre, en ton courroux,
Marque de ton limon le sommet des bambous;

Que l'homme fuie au loin tes deux rives mouvantes!
 Pétris le sol selon tes caprices de roi,
 Et que l'arche du ciel s'élargisse sur toi,
 Grand fleuve, Tonlé-Tom, dragon des épouvantes.

Despote, rétrécis le lit de l'océan,
 Et pousse sans arrêt vers son gouffre béant,
 Avec tes sables qui s'agrègeront en îles,
 Les arbres arrachés aux plateaux du Thibet,
 Et les mille débris dont un monde se fait,
 Parcelles en suspens des grands deltas fertiles.

Exalte ta puissance, et fait craquer la loi
 Qui veut t'emprisonner dans un lit trop étroit!
 [p. 181] Conquiers l'infini, toi, le fils du mystère:
 Symbolise l'esprit qui s'acharne à grandir,
 Multiplie en tous sens les flots de ton désir,
 Et brise devant toi les bornes de la terre."

Spiritus songe ainsi... Le jour tombe... Les eaux
 Que le soleil couchant paillette de ticaux,
 Mêlent à l'air charmé des musiques câlines.
 Aux villages perchés sur pilotis, là-bas,
 Des femmes montrant la nudité de leurs bras
 Voilent d'un tissu clair d'opulentes poitrines,

Rigides borassus aux panaches confus,
 Et sveltes arèkiers amincissant leurs fûts,
 Embarrassant le vol affamé des vampires;
 C'est l'heure où les gourons, sous les arbres sacrés
 Surchagés d'ex-votos et de papiers dorés,
 Brûlent des parfums bleus qui s'exhalent en spires.

Tout est repos, et tout invite à la langueur
 Spiritus... L'air s'émeut, le vent est enjôleur.
 L'univers est vibrant de lyres infinies.
 Le rêve voit ce soir ce que l'œil ne voit pas:
 [p. 182] Les mânes réveillés s'envolent des stupas,
 Le visage est frôlé par l'âme des génies.

Défaillance du cœur! Halaines de jasmins!
 Chastes frissons des sens sous d'invisibles mains!
 La clarté peu à peu se meurt... De longs nuages,
 Crocodiles massifs accrochés au ciel bas,
 Se traînant vers l'ouest: homme, bêtes, sont las,
 Mais des mouches de feu dansent dans les feuillages.

Le Cambodge sommeille, et parfois on croirait
 Vous voir flotter sur l'eau, la jungle et la forêt,
 Légendes de jadis, dans vos robes de fête.
 Un son de fifre, au loin, s'exhale d'un sampan,

Et spiritus s'endort, – tandis que se suspend
L'équilibre effrayant des astres sur sa tête.

* * *

La nuit s'enfuit: vers l'est, le ciel s'est argenté,
Et le jour ouvre son éventail de clarté.

[p. 183]La terre s'embellit de jeunesse et de joie,
Comme un visage humain s'illumine d'amour.
O matin triomphal, écarlate vautour,
Étends jusqu'au zénith ton aile qui rougeoit!

L'immensité frémit! O vertige! ô réveil!
L'âme infuse dans tout monte vers le soleil,
De l'ivresse bouillonne aux flancs de la matière!
Onde bleue épousant la forme des coteaux,
L'air ruisselle; et partout, bêtes et végétaux
Se baignent dans ta gloire, océan de lumière!

Les flamants sur la plaine ont courbé leur essor!
Et, fluide serpent qui serait squammé d'or,
Le Mekhong, ruisselant d'une splendeur nouvelle,
Tord et détord sans fin ses multiples anneaux;
Un martin-pêcheur passe, habillé de bijoux,
Tout est jeune, tout chante, et voici qu'étincelle,

Au fond de l'horizon, Pnom-Penh, fille des dieux,
Capitale des Khmers, où trône radieux
[p. 184]L'empereur Préa-Kham, pilier vivant du monde,
Avatar du soleil, et face de Bouddha.
Comme un lotus géant qui sort des eaux, c'est là
Que la ville offre au ciel sa corolle profonde.

Cité des mandarins aux cent vingt mille honneurs,
Des éléphants vêtus de broccarts tapageurs;
Des toits plaqués d'argent qui font de la musique,
Lorsque le vent émeut leurs cloches de métal,
Et soulève dans l'air l'arôme du santal;
Cité de la couleur et du verbe emphatique;

Cité du mysticisme et de la volupté,
Où des femmes, les seins mi-nus, sous la clarté,
Enivrent les regards de leurs formes parfaites,
Et caressent les sens d'une odeur de jasmins,
Près des bonzes sacrés qui hantent les chemins,
Crâne ras, robe jaune, et maigreurs de prophètes.

C'est là que resplendit le glaive impérial,
Plus beau de ses anciens triomphes sur le mal
[p. 185]Que des lourds cabochons ocellant sa poignée.
Palladium des Khmers, comme une idole, il a
Pour prêtres les bakous, descendants de Brahma:

Dans son fourreau divin vit l'âme d'une fée.

Pnom-Penh! Fastes royaux! Musiciens! Chanteurs!
Cortèges d'apparat escortés de licteurs!
Parasols de satin aux multiples étages,
Soupirs des flageolets et des harmonicas,
Prosternements du peuple en face des lingas,
Éléphants albinos adorés par les mages!

* * *

Qu'importe à Spiritus la ville d'aujourd'hui?
Il veut voir la cité sur qui pèse la nuit
Formidable des temps et des forêts mytiques:
Il veut voir Angkor-Tom et les dieux du passé.
C'est pourquoi, défiant le fleuve courroucé,
Il vogue vers le seuil des palais brahmaniques.

Derrière le rideau des borassus, Pnom-Penh
S'éloigne peu à peu dans des lointains d'Éden,
[p. 186] Puis soudain disparaît sous des flots de verdure:
Son temple crématoire au toit luisant d'émail,
Seul, surnage un moment, – et le mol éventail
Du vent met dans l'espace une fraîcheur d'eau pure.

Or des jours et des jours, sous la laque du ciel,
Loin des hommes, parle le mirage éternel
Des collines, des eaux, des arbres et des palmes,
Le bateau s'en alla, laissant derrière lui
Une écharpe d'argent qui mourait dans du bruit,
Et fendait de ses mâts les immensités calmes.

Bercé par sa pensée ainsi qu'en un hamac,
Spiritus mollement glissa vers le Grand Lac:
Ce fut l'obsession des horizons liquides,
Des longs vols d'échassiers sur des bancs de poissons,
Des soirs fiévreux où la chait n'est plus que frissons,
Et des matins brumeux sur des flots tout en rides.

Sur ses vivants piliers incurvant ses berceaux,
La Forêt fabuleuse enfin sortit des eaux;
[p. 187] Elle s'ennoblissait d'un silence de temple,
Et, sous l'ardent soleil qui la criblait de rais,
Épaississait ses murs autour de ses secrets,
Joyaux qui brillent mieux dans une nuit plus ample.

Le poète entra seul dans son dôme. Le jour,
Comme glisse sur l'âme un souvenir d'amour,
Glissait de feuille en feuille, et constellait la terre.
Lianes et rameaux s'entremêlaient parfois
Ainsi que les amants entremêlent leurs doigts;
Le lumière indécise était sœur du mystère.

Pas de chemin! Partout, hérissés d'ongles durs,
 Des rotins vénéneux, auprès d'étangs impurs;
 Des herbes, des roseaux porteurs de blancs panaches,
 Des racines trouant le sol mou de leurs bras,
 Des agarics géants convertis (*sic*) de lichens ras,
 Et, tels que des crapauds, tout ponctués de taches.

Puis c'étaient les yaos, les arbres résineux,
 Séculaires, sous leur carapace de nœuds;
 [p. 188]Et les Multipliants que le Siam adore,
 Arbres-temples hantés par des essaims d'esprits;
 La terre s'exhaussait de leurs rameaux flétris,
 Et des singes riaient sous leur cime sonore.

Abondante en poisons et gluante de miels,
 Riche de souffles purs ou pestilentiels,
 La forêt, horrible et sublime,
 Attirait Spiritus comme attire un abîme.

Des Feuillages aigus l'entouraient de poignards ;
 D'autres simulaient des massues;
 Sur les humus fiévreux pullulaient les sangsues.
 Les branches s'animaient, et partout des regards
 Luisaient dans des ombres hostiles:
 Des troncs rugueux semblaient des dos de crocodiles;
 Sur le sol glissaient des serpents,
 Dans les airs planaient des vampires:
 La forêt tout entière était un guet-apens.
 Mais ses pensers vibrant en lui comme des lyres,
 Le poète, emporté par un besoin d'essor,
 Triomphait de la vie en dédaignant la mort,
 [p. 189]Et marchait plus avant parmi les lances vertes.
 Or soudain le soleil bleuit les eaux inertes:
 Le ciel parut, voûté comme un arc triomphal,
 Et Spiritus, là-bas, au fond d'une clairière,
 Vit le temple royal
 D'Angkor-Vat s'élander de terre,
 Vertigineusement, comme un hymne de pierre:

La pagode érigeait ses tours pyramidales,
 Et ses escaliers droits où, sur de larges dalles,
 Des lions, crins épars, et les crocs menaçants,
 Opposaient au soleil leurs faces courroucées.
 Des portails colossaux dominaient des chaussées,
 Et creusaient de trous noirs les murs éblouissants.

L'empereur des serpents, le montre heptacéphale,
 Le naga, contourné savamment en spirale,
 Décorait le fronton des portiques sacrés;
 Ou, déroulé sans fin le long des avenues,

Multiples, redressait son poitrail vers les nues,
 Et criait vers les cieux de ses geules de grès.
 [p. 190] Des gradins s'étagaient sur des gradins; les cimes
 Des tours se surplombaient à des hauteurs sublimes,
 Accaparant l'espace, escaladant l'azur:
 Le firmament était rapetissé par elles.
 On pouvait les rêver presque immatérielles:
 Vers l'infini, leur vol était tranquille et sûr.

Ce temple prouvait Dieu par sa seule harmonie.
 À la force, la grâce était partout unies;
 Ses pilastres portaient des chapiteaux géants,
 Mais ils étaient fouillés de fleurs surnaturelles.
 Des monolithes lourds finissaient en dentelles,
 Des flammes effilaient l'ogive des tympan.

Le préasat central dominant la pagode
 Frémissait tout entier d'un frémissement d'ode
 Dont les strophes seraient des strophes de granit.
 L'âme des siècles morts revivait dans sa pierre;
 Sur le monde, il dressait un lotus de lumière:
 Par lui, le rêve humain montait jusqu'au zénith.

C'est là que Spiritus, en longeant des murailles
 Où des singes livraient pour les dieux des batailles,
 [p. 191] De degrés en degrés, sous les yeux des lions,
 Parmi de hauts piliers sculptés jusqu'à la base,
 Arrive, couronné du nimbe de l'extase,
 Au faite glorieux de ses ascensions.

Or, quelque pas encore, et, dans le sanctuaire,
 Il verra le soleil dont l'univers s'éclaire,
 Le sage aux yeux fermés trônant sur un serpent;
 Celui qui, hors du cercle des métempsychoses,
 Médite, sans bouger, à la cime des choses
 Bouddha, que les rois Khmers n'approchent qu'en rampant.

Près du seuil trois fois saint tendant leur gorge nue,
 Dansent des apsaras; et leur chair ingénue
 Sourit sous la splendeur des quadruples colliers:
 Courtisanes du ciel qui naquirent de l'onde,
 L'énigme est enchâssée en leur figure ronde,
 Les paradis leur sont des jardins familiers.

Sans les voir, le poète, armé de son audace,
 S'avance, et, tout à coup, se trouve face à face
 Avec l'Omniscient: d'emphatiques couleurs
 Font rutiler le dieu de flammes immobiles:
 [p. 192] Dans l'ombre, autour de lui, chauves-souris, reptiles,
 Animent les murs froids d'où suintent des terreurs.

Et Spiritus, debout, plein d'orgueil, le regrade...

* * *

Dans la forêt hagarde,
Par les chemins saturés de poisons,
Entre de mouvantes cloisons,
Chemine aujourd'hui le poète;
Mais il n'est plus seul: il emporte la tête
Rouge et or du Bouddha qu'il a décapité,
Du Bouddha d'Angkor Vat, de l'idole fatale
Dont le front dominait la pagode royale.

Spiritus a voulu posséder sa beauté,
Et sa main déicide,
Obéissant au vœu de son âme intrépide
A détaché du tronc la tête que voici:
Maintenant il s'en va, cœur léger de souci...

[p. 193] Oui, Spiritus marche sans crainte,
Bien qu'il se soit perdu, dans le vert labyrinthe.

Le soir tombe, ou le jour paraît,
Lui va toujours, à l'aventure,
Ceint de la multiple imposture
De la forêt.

La fièvre dans ses yeux surexcite sa flamme;
Ses pieds saignent, son front s'appesantit déjà:
Mais ses bras affaiblis, ranimés par son âme,
Portent comme un bloc d'or la tête de Bouddha.

Maintenant, il fait nuit, toujours, sous les feuillages!
Des miasmes traînent leur vol
Sur les pourritures des âges:
C'est la mort qui monte du sol.
Tout à coup Spiritus chancelle,
Et tombe sous le dieu qui sourit dans ses bras.

Et l'effroi de mourir dilate sa prunelle!
[p. 194] La vie! Ah! Vivre encor! Les larmes! Les combats!
L'assaut de l'impossible au galop des chimères!
Rêver, lutter, vouloir! Vivre d'éternité
Par la possession des choses éphémères!
Ah! vaincre ses rivaux! Créer de la beauté!
Arroser de son sang les chemins de sa joie!
Et poursuivre l'amour! Être un homme de proie!
Te boire toute en un vertige sensuel,
O femme, grappe d'or de la treille des mondes!

Spiritus reverra la majesté du ciel!
Il sortira vivant des ténèbres! L'appel
Des larges horizons, des collines, des ondes,

Il l'entend résonner comme un blâme en son cœur!
 Et la forêt frémit d'un tumulte vainqueur,
 Fanfare de la vie en ses branches profondes;
 Lui, l'élu, le poète en qui l'humanité
 Incarne ses désirs de joie et de beauté,
 Lui qui sent l'héroïsme habiter dans son torse,
 Il faut contre la mort qu'il dresse son vouloir,
 [p. 195] Qu'il érige, sur ses défaillances, l'espoir,
 Et vainque la forêt dans un sursaut de force!

Enivrement sacré! Dans son âme et son sang,
 Sa jeunesse s'épand ainsi qu'un vin puissant!
 Il se lève, et déjà... Mais l'idole massive
 Enchaîne son élan, et, trop lourde à ses bras,
 Immobilise au sol ses pieds soudain plus las...
 Et l'horreur de mourir en Spiritus s'avive...

Un conseil est épars dans la douceur de l'air:
 Et tout à coup ses yeux s'animent d'un éclair:
 Qu'il s'en aille joyeux vers le jour, le poète!
 Ses mains libres, parmi les rameaux entêtés,
 Vont pouvoir se frayer des chemins de clarté!
 O joie! Il est sauvé! Car il bradit la tête
 De l'idole, et, bien loin, dans les herbes, la jette,
 Puis, rapide, s'enfuit, plein d'espoir et plus fort!
 Pourtant il se retourne... Il la regarde encor...

La forêt lui compose un sauvage décor,
 Et l'immuable nuit autour d'elle s'éclair,
 [p. 196] Car se son front émane une clarté stellaire.
 Sous sa paupière filtre un regard qui bénit:
 Ce visage muet parle de l'infini;
 Ce dieu joint à sa force une douceur de femme,
 Et sa beauté vivante est la chaîne de l'âme...

Or Spiritus s'élance! Il la reprend soudain!
 Et s'en va vers la mort, sous le fardeau divin.

Annex 8: Pierre Rey, 'La Danseuse' *La Terre de Bouddha*. ed. by Kent Davis (Fl.: DatASIA, [1923] 2013), n. p.

- 1 Les femmes ont cousu, sur son corps de déesse,
 Le maillot merveilleux qu'un artiste broda,
 Et, sur ses cheveux noirs, rebelles à la tresse,
 Posé le 'Phnom' sacré des saintes Tevadas.

- 5 Ayant fardé son front que le lourd casque blesse,
 Et tracé sur ses yeux le signe de Védas,
 Nou, la danseuse, est prête, et prescrit qu'on abaisse
 Le rideau de brocart au seuil des vérandas.

10 Comme un bijou vivant qui vibre au son du gong,
Son jeune corps, tremblant ainsi qu'un souple jonc,
Bondit, d'un seul élan, vers les marches du trône.

Et le Fils des grands Rois qui bâtirent Angkor
Daigne voir, à ses pieds, le bel insecte d'or,
Et sourire au salut de la frêle amazone.

25 janvier 1913

Annex 9: Albert de Pouvourville, 'Les Rouges', *Rimes d'Asie*, (Paris: E. Figuière, 1912), pp. 169-72

Pour Élie et Jacques de Commaille

I

1 Un ciseau génial, ample et magicien,
A magnifié les murs d'un relief gigantesque:
De la porte massive au pnôm aérien,
Sur les palais d'Angkor court l'énorme arabesque.

5 Les Rois Rouges ont fait, au sol cambodgien,
Se dérouler, dans un interminable fresque,
Des jours évanouis immortel gardien,
Tout un peuple de pierre, immobile et dantesque.

Ceux-là n'ont pas de nom. Pleins d'un naïf mépris

10 Pour l'écriture et pour la plume évocatoire,
Le marbre et le marteau, dans leurs frustes esprits,
Leur sont seuls apparus dignes de leur victoire:

Et, livrant leur mémoire au soleil préemptoire,
Leurs héros, dédaignant les écrivains proscrits,
15 Aux flancs de la patrie ont sculpté leur histoire.

II

Les Rouges ont passé. De Leur trône qu'ébrèche
L'inexorable Temps, les Rois sont descendus.
Filles des lourds étés, la liane et la laïche
Envahissant les toits des palais confondus.

20 La nature a parfait, sans que rien l'en empêche,
Le geste destructeur des siècles assidus:
Et, sous l'âpre baiser de la brousse revêche,
Les fresques sont brisées, et les marbres tordus.

Des scribes dédaignés c'est l'amère riposte.

25 Rien ne fut fait pour l'âme, et rien ne reste aux yeux.
Sous les fourrés trop neufs, et sur un sol trop vieux,
Aujourd'hui, sans passé, sans livres, sans aïeux,

Anonyme déchet, vague une foule agnoste;
Et la terre offre au ciel, en un même holocauste,
30 La cendre des forêts, des héros et des dieux.

(Sous la Ruine Khmer)

* * *

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