

## Saigon: a European City? 19th-20th centuries

Thibault LEROY

### ABSTRACT

According to a comparison made by the first administrators of the colony, Saigon was meant to be a French Singapore. But Saigon never measured up to that British port and crossroads, the object of much jealousy, even if its location placed it at the confluence of the branches of the Mekong delta and gave it a hinterland of at least 300,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Saigon was also the expression of colonial triumph: Europeans felt at home there among the grand avenues and architecture of the neighbourhoods reserved for them. In the accounts of travellers, Saigon quickly acquired the image of a lascivious city, with a joyful atmosphere, characterised by lightness and charm. The economic capital of French Indochina, it was also a city of fractures: the urban centre was European and the periphery was native. Saigon was the product of colonial history and was made by its settlers, even if the first stirrings of revolution hatched there in the 1920s and 1930s. European society was not, however, completely impermeable or homogenous.



"Taking of the citadel of Saigon by the French-Spanish expedition, under the command of Admiral Rigault de Genouilly, on February 17, 1859. Drawing from the April 23, 1859 edition of the newspaper L'illustration. Source: Wikimedia Commons "

### Colonial sociology

The European population in Saigon was a minority, as it was in the whole colony: in the three mixed municipalities

(Saigon, Cholon and Cap-Saint-Jacques) the Europeans numbered only 12,000 in 1940 out of a total urban population of 440,000 (i.e. 2.6% of the city, compared to just 0.34% of the colony of Cochinchina and 0.14% of the whole of French Indochina). So Europeans were concentrated in the city, to say the least. The European population had risen significantly, having numbered only 4000 at the beginning of the century. The city was also made by the Europeans: its total population was no more than 6000 when the French arrived in 1860. This demographic development had several consequences. Firstly, the European population had the feeling of being a minority in a position of superiority, because it occupied the top of the social pyramid. Secondly, as it grew over time (and included larger numbers of women, executives and commercial professions) it was not only linked to the adventure of conquest but to the exploitation of the colony, which sometimes led to tensions within this social group.

Where did these Europeans come from? They often came from French regions in crisis: there was a large Corsican community in Saigon and the Corsican Association (*Amicale des Corses*) was one of the most active associations, known for its strong solidarity. But the Corsicans who went to Saigon were mainly poor. People also came from Brittany and Auvergne.

The colonial city was a symbolic expression of the colonial hierarchy: Europeans lived in separate neighbourhoods, usually in villas, while the Asians lived on the outskirts of the city. Between the two, the Cité Heyraud, the site of a massacre of French settlers in September 1945) was, despite everything, the example of a mixed quarter that played the role of a transition between the two spaces. Here lived Europeans of modest means, half-castes, and Indochinese, the go-betweens of colonial society. This European society was therefore heterogeneous, particularly in terms of socio-professional categories.

### **European (or European style) sociability**

Writing in 1883, Pierre Loti felt a sense of familiarity regarding Saigon, which reminded him of Rochefort. He described "an unexpected feeling, that of arriving home." Saigon was a site of European sociability: an opera, a racecourse, a stadium for football or rugby matches and above all the *Cercle sportif saïgonnais* (Saigon sports club) contributed to providing the necessary entertainment for Europeans during their stay in the colony. The latter was very selective in the social recruitment of its members: it was where one engaged in suitably bourgeois activities such as bridge, swimming in the pool, tennis and fencing. In *La Boule gauloise*, on the other hand, one played bowls (*pétanque*) and cards (*belote*) which mainly attracted the junior managers. Finally, there was the Soldiers' and Sailors' Home (*Foyer du soldat et du marin*) for the rank and file—the officers went to the *Cercle*. People therefore largely kept to their own: the administrators rubbed shoulders with the planters and with the officers of the army and navy, as seen in certain marriage strategies. All these activities and these places, not to mention the names given to the streets, quarters and schools, contributed to constructing a city that was mentally European. There, one could exist as if in Europe, an image that played a sometimes unconscious but nevertheless substantial role at the moment of decolonisation.

Other forms of a more marginal sociability were also practised by Europeans, contributing to making Saigon a city a fantasies of Far-Eastern exoticism. Opium was sold freely by the Customs Board. Relationships, which were not limited to prostitution, were formed with "congais," Vietnamese girlfriends or fiancées, a way for Europeans to indulge in long- or short-term pleasures (that were not only heterosexual or male: Marguerite Duras famously recalled her mixed-race affairs in *L'Amant*). Behind this image of a sensual Saigon, these relationships benefitted the colonists, who could thereby "possess" an often isolated young girl without education or fortune. Many mixed race children were born from these unions, whose place in both native and European society was problematic. The feminisation of the colony during the interwar period modified this image of Saigon, "the pearl of the far east," and ultimately made it a thing of the past. Officials now arrived accompanied by their wives.

Finally, like an invitation to reflect on how long it would last, the European community also experienced political

sociability: Freemasons, liberals and even socialists rubbed shoulders there. Paul Monin is, in this regard, an interesting example of a politician: a friend of André Malraux, he went from the nationalist right in his youth to becoming a lawyer who defended the democratic rights of the Vietnamese, particularly in the newspaper *L'Indochine* that he published in Saigon. In 1926 and 1927 he travelled to China where he met Hồ Chi Minh. Europeans had a political life that was sometimes disconnected from the metropolis. After the experience of Vichy, which was experienced from afar, and then the Japanese occupation, the time of colonial rule was over: Saigon experienced extremely violent clashes during the revolutionary months of September and October 1945, foreshadowing the war.

Many Europeans left the sinking ship of Indochina and its bridgehead, Saigon, in 1954 at the moment of the Geneva Agreements. Already, the image of the city no longer matched its past, and the city changed even more when the Americans discovered it ten years later. Naturally, some European racketeers and journalists remained in the city throughout the subsequent period, but to a lesser degree and with much less influence on its urban space as well as on its urbanity.

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