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

Colonial postcards are often published and critiqued for their racist and propagandistic content, but the ethnographic value of the postcard has been rejected from official colonial publications. However, the postcard collecting as a ‘feminine vice’ (Naomi Schor 1994: 262), and women were major donors of museum collections. Several Chinese photographers (Tong Sing, Pun-Lun, Yu Cong) and one Vietnamese (Phan Chau Trinh, an exiled nationalist) were well known, although their photographs were sometimes rejected from official colonial publications (Franchini and Ghesquière 2001: 249).

The French community in Indochina was tiny, estimated at between 25,000 and 43,000 at its peak in 1940, which was roughly 0.2 percent of the total population. At the turn of the century, almost all French citizens in Indochina were born in France, and the vast majority expected to return there, so they tended to see themselves as exiles rather than settlers. While Indochina was far from France both spatially and conceptually, its elaborate temples and exotic culture made it ‘the pearl of the Extreme Orient’ (a rival to British India’s ‘jewel in the crown’), and it was promoted as the most civilised, as well as the most profitable, of the colonies.

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

Janet Naesken

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Few of the writers of the belle époque expressed a desire to spend the rest of their lives in what seemed a remote outpost of a far-flung empire. Some were bored, depressed and homesick, while others found their adventurous travels exciting, interesting and challenging. As a group, they were wealthy and had great economic power, since they controlled the most sizeable French colonial economy after Algeria’s (Brochier and Hennery 1995:310). As individuals, however, many were poor and plagued by debt and disease, often asking relatives in Europe for financial assistance. Dysentery and malaria were endemic, and cholera was an intermittent threat to public health. Colonial nostalgia had come to cloak the region in a fog of dark romanticism, epitomised by the cliché of the opium-inspired reverie, in which naked concubines and noble savages float around on sampans, drifting across the bay of Ha Long. Postcard messages, while they often comment sarcastically on these themes, also move us away from remembered delights to everyday concerns, and show us a population not merely reflecting on a lost past but grappling with present concerns.

It is my argument that the interior of the colonial is often made visible through images of the colonised. Although racial stereotyping remains part of the picture, there is also a more subtle process of seeking out the mysteries of the ‘natives’ and using this peculiar world as a mirror to reflect upon aspects of their own lives. In 1854, Oliver Wendell Holmes described photography and postcards coincided with the new technology that reflected one’s past experiences, and show us a population not merely reflecting on a lost past but grappling with present concerns.

The transition from a glorified, masculinist age of conquest (which in Indochina corresponds to the turn of the 20th century) to a tamer, more bourgeois form of settler colonialism is not only denied in French colonial postcard images, it is the motivation for their miniature format. Susan Stewart observes that “The miniature, linked to domesticity, presents a diminutive, and thereby more sedate image of colonial life, filled with a large, loquacious script, to the man who may be his employer. She sends 43 cards, filled with a large, loquacious script, to the woman she describes as her dear confidant. They seem to inhabit two very different countries - hers is utterly enchanting, while he is repugnant.”

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uniquely suited to the world of photography. Erotic images (figs 1, 2, 4, and 5) make up a quarter of the whole, followed by scenes of daily life (fig. 6, 7, 9) and landscapes or street scenes (fig. 8). Sardonic jokes and cheerful greetings inscribed in the front image are often paired with painful confessions on the back (fig. 9).

One couple in Hanoi, Paul and Béreille Ullman, received over 70 postcards from former houseguests, another couple who lived in Laos from 1904 to 1950. Mr. Ullman was an engineer and the Chief of Public Works in Hanoi. The sender is a skilled at using anretirement which writes that he is depressed and tired. He feels homesick and believes he is cursed with bad luck (‘ça f’ait toujours le gagne-pain que j’aurai suivi’). He worries about his health and his finances and declares he has no taste to stay on in Indochina. His wife, on the other hand, describes life as wild and full of charm, and is enthusiastic about the beauty of the countryside, local festivals, women’s hairstyles and theatrical performances. He finds the weather exhausting (‘épuisant’), while she finds it invigorating (‘température idéale’). Their child becomes tanned and healthy from staying on in Indochina. His wife, on the other hand, describes life as wild and exhausting (‘énervant’) while she finds it invigorating (‘température idéale’). Their child becomes tanned and healthy from staying on in Indochina. His wife, on the other hand, describes life as wild and exhausting (‘énervant’) while she finds it invigorating (‘température idéale’). Their child becomes tanned and healthy from staying on in Indochina.

The postcard writers had a variety of reactions to the images, and while we do not know very much about them as individuals, we can contextualise their comments and try to understand them for what they are - part of a process of mirroring and projection, which is