

# Framing Indochina through Visual Rhetoric: A Colonial Gaze of Vietnam in the French Empire

## Introduction and Background

- This research project examined the visual rhetoric behind vintage Vietnamese postcards. Through analysis and background research, I perused FSU's Postcard Archive to formulate my own personal, digital exhibition.
- The following postcards portray the historical implications of French colonization within Vietnam during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Each postcard reflects France's influence within the region and demonstrates how postcards were utilized as a commercial form of propaganda. Such memorabilia were introduced to the French people as a means of exoticizing the Indochina region. Each postcard uniquely exhibits Western ideals of civilization through the French architecture, the postcards' text, and their overall theme of colonial, imperial idealization.
- Indochina referred to the geographical region of Southeast Asia, mainly consisting of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; this study focuses on the former country. France had maintained their occupation of Indochina and established colonial rule in Vietnam up until 1954 with the mandatory removal of French troops following their loss at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu; the Geneva Conference also helped solidify Vietnam and the rest of Indochina's independence.
- This postcard exhibition depicts scenes captured from Vietnam, including "Tonkin." This area was an important economic colony for France, as it was a crucial hub located on the Red River Delta.

## Methodology

- All the postcards presented in this research project were purchased through an online marketplace. After reviewing FSU's Postcard Archive, I began searching for cards that would further develop my investigation into this topic. As such, the timeline of this study was rather non-traditional as I worked backwards. The last step of this project focused on obtaining postcards to solidify my research question.
- Prior to conducting independent research into this topic, I and other UROP students had to familiarize ourselves with the digital archive system, OMEKA. It is used to categorize hundreds of postcards housed on FSU's Postcard Archive. Members of the public can peruse countless exhibits along with modern/historical cards.
- During this study, I archived each postcard I gathered according to the proper metadata. This included a general description of each card, providing it a source code, and deciding on the key words that best suit the images. The latter step is an important way for other researchers or individuals using the archive to find specific postcards related to their topic/interest.
- Curating my own exhibition was largely informed by the countless other digital postcard exhibits housed within OMEKA's system. I also utilized detailed rhetorical analysis to draw significant connections to my topic beyond the postcards' surface-level visuals. Each image portrayed a unique facet of French colonization, adding to the overall significance of both the exhibition and this study.

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## Exoticism



A map of the northern Vietnam region

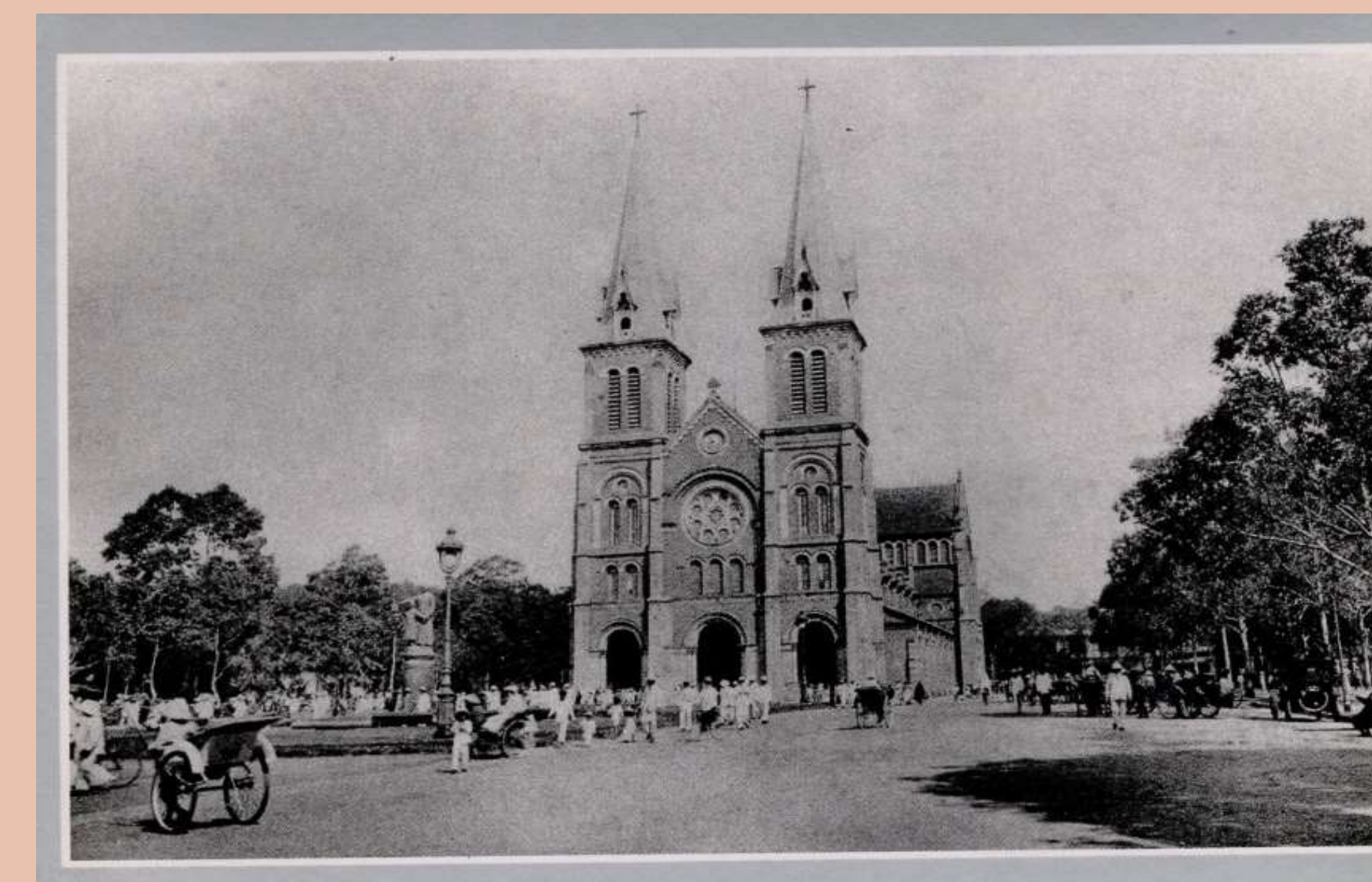


A lifestyle image of a Vietnamese family

## Sociopolitical Impact



Colonial Infantry soldiers in front of the Citadel

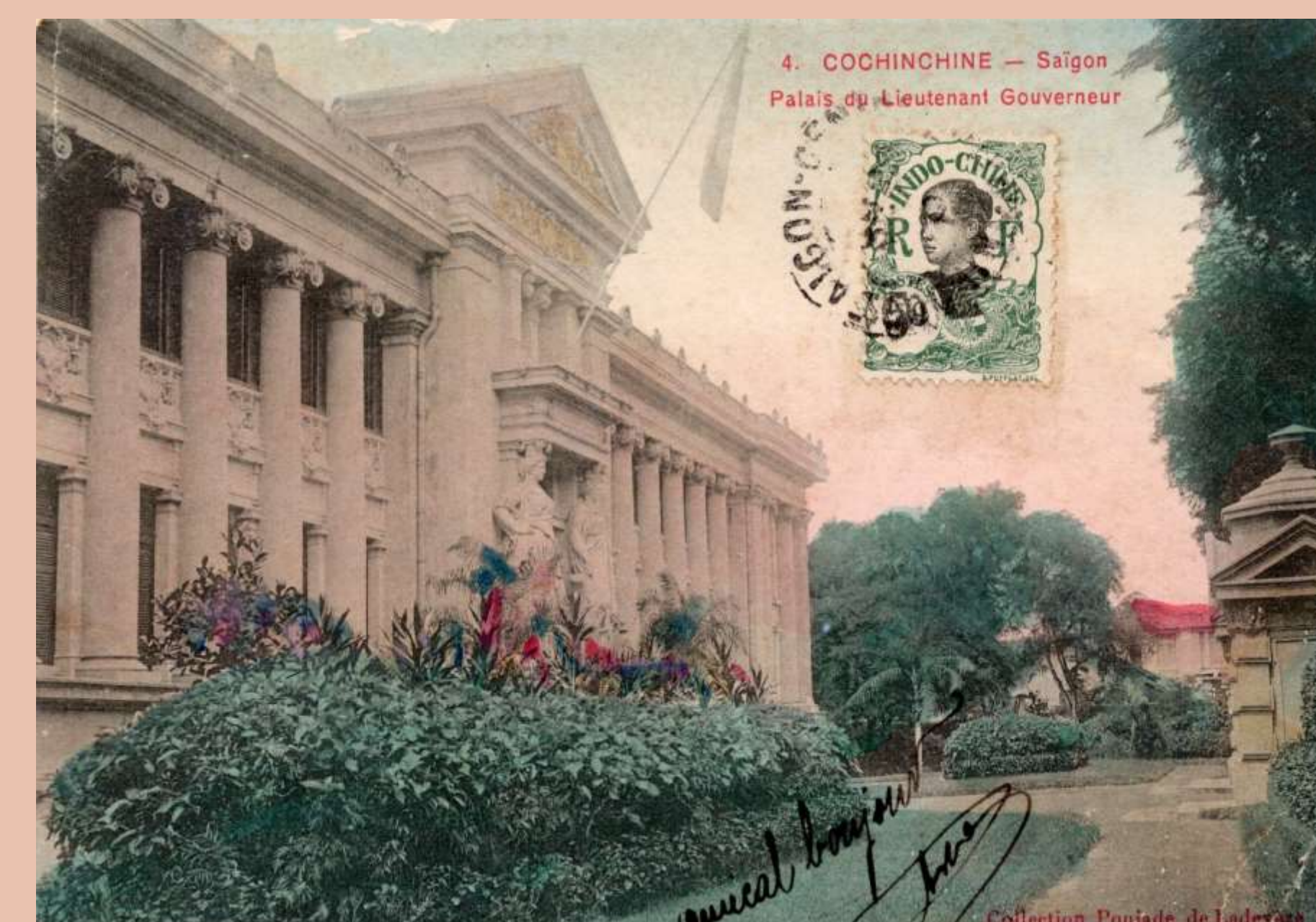


Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica of Saigon

## Architecture



The Palace of the Governor-General



The Palace of the Lieutenant General

## Results

- All six of these vintage postcards represent the broader scope of French colonization within Vietnam. I separated them into three distinct categories: exoticism, architecture, and sociopolitical impact.
- Every postcard includes French captions/descriptions. Almost all the postcards that I archived within FSU's Postcard Archive featured personalized writing on the message side.
- The accompanying text along with the postcards' visual rhetoric implies that they were manufactured specifically for the French. Every postcard symbolizes the country's control within Vietnam politically and socially.
- While I was curating this exhibition, I had to translate the French text into English. The second postcard depicted on the top left corresponds roughly to, "The Lice Eaters as a Family" (Les Mangeurs de poux en famille). This notable scene of daily life in Vietnam places an emphasis on the country's culture. However, there is also a broader implication on how Vietnamese society was perceived as "foreign" in comparison to Western society.
- The remaining postcards in this exhibition portray France's architectural influence within the region. From large columns to the symmetrical design, France constructed many imposing buildings, statues, etc. during their occupation in Vietnam. The Holy Virgin Church seen in the middle right postcard reflects the structural style one would see in Europe. This architectural display visually reflects how France and other European powers often justified their colonization/expansion (i.e., a civilizing mission/Christian duty).

## Conclusion

- One common theme present throughout my postcard exhibition was the effect of French colonization in Vietnam during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century up to today. Most of the architecture displayed on these postcards remain in the country. For example, the former Governor-General's Palace in Hanoi is now known as the Presidential Palace.
- While each postcard was initially distributed as a quick form of communication, they now serve as important visual artifacts to capture historical documentation. Through visual analysis, all six postcards reflect various patterns of Western occupation. Further study can be done with other occupied nations by European countries to examine the effects and societal expectations of the West.

## References

- Lau, Jason. *French Colonialism in Vietnam*, Lawrence University, 1 June 2016, students.lawrence.edu/lauj/an-analysis-of-a-colonial-postcard/.
- "[Photos] Vintage Postcards Capture the Grand Landmarks of Old Saigon." *Saigoneer*, Saigoneer, 14 Nov. 2016, saigoneer.com/old-saigon/8513-photos-vintage-postcards-capture-the-grand-landmarks-of-old-saigon#.