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We Chose to Remember: Indochinese Colonial Architecture in Vietnam as Vectors of Memory

In 1886, the Statue of Liberty was completed in New York City after 10 years of construction. The statue was a gift from the French government to the United States for the centennial celebration of the nation. At the same time, two other identical statues were also produced with much smaller dimensions. One was placed in Paris (at 11 meters height), and the other one (at 2,85 meters height) was dedicated at the Grand Palais de l'Exposition for the World Exhibition of 1902 in Hanoi.¹



Image 1: Tuong Ba Dam Xoe (Statue of Liberty) in Jardin Botanique de Neyrat (1896).

¹ Binh, Hai. "Nóc Tháp Rùa từng có tượng Thần Tự Do?" VietnamNet, April 10, 2011. <https://vietnamnet.vn/noc-thap-rua-tung-co-tuong-than-tu-do-15854.html>

After the exhibition and different placement changes, the Statue of Liberty was moved in 1896 to the Neyrat Botanical Garden in Hanoi.² In 1945, after the withdrawal of the French military, the Statue of Liberty, along with the statues of Paul Bert, Ferdinand Foch and Jean Depuis, were pulled down and destroyed.³ Parts of the Statue of Liberty were scavenged and melted down to make the bronze statue of Buddha in the Ngu Xa City in the neighboring area.

The destruction of these statues reflect a resistance of the Vietnamese population against French imperial power. Similar to other colonial projects, the Statue of Liberty was one of the many examples of the way the French empire wanted to exercise its power through the modification of the landscape in the colony - Indochinese Vietnam. The spatial edification and the enhancement of the built environment were the attempts of the imperial government to imitate French cities.⁴ For these reasons, there still exist numerous buildings in modern Vietnam that reflect different aspects of French aesthetics. They become *lieux de mémoire* because they carry the history and the collective memory of the inhabitants in the colony and also of the Vietnamese citizens today.⁵ This paper will examine the Indochinese colonial architectural works as vectors of memory.⁶

Historical Context

The creation of Indochina (1887 - 1946)

France first became involved in Southeast Asia in 1858 to engage with China militaristically and economically, and also to compete with other European powers for new

² The statue was moved in several places throughout the years. It was notably placed on the Tuong Thap Rua (Temple of a Mystic Turtle) which was a symbol of old Hanoi.

³ “Pho tượng “Bà đầm xoè” bị giật đổ 9 giờ 45 phút ngày 1/8/1945.” Indochina Times, August 2, 1945.

⁴ “Spatial Edification” refers to the series of structures that were built in Indochina to support religious and cultural activities of French colonizers.

⁵ Pierre Nora. *Les Lieux De Mémoire*. Quarto. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1997.

⁶ “Vectors of memory” is often associated with Henry Rousso (*The Vichy Syndrome : History and Memory in France Since 1944*) and Nancy Wood (*Vectors of Memory : Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe*) to describe the commemorative activities that are often linked with traumatic pasts. In their case, they studied the era of Post-War Europe.

territories.⁷ However, the military objective soon turned into a desire to colonize. Geographically, Indochina denotes the spaces between India and China, which comprises modern-day Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Soon, a new society emerged with a distinct cultural and political identity: *l'Indochine française*.⁸ Indochina, as we come to know it today, included Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and a part of China.



⁷ Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: an ambiguous colonization, 1858-1954*. Trans. Ly Lan Dill-Klein, with Eric Jennings, Nora Taylor, and Noémi Tousignant. (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2009).

⁸ Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters*. (United Kingdom: Berg, 2001).

Image 2: Map 1.1. Stages in the making of French Indochina. (*Histoire militaire de l'Indochine*, vol.3 [Hanoi, 1931].) ⁹

After little resistance from the indigenous population due to lack of militaristic prowess, France quickly acquired the territory and created the Indochinese Union in 1887, officially opening the French colonization period.¹⁰ This new territorial acquisition necessitated a deconstruction and reconstruction of the government. It is interesting to note that France never governed Indochina “directly,” the only region that was under immediate control of France was Cochinchina.¹¹ Laos and Cambodia were considered protectorates and the French rulers would elect elites from the monarchy or the royal families as ministers of the colonies.¹² Paul Doumer, the governor of Indochina in 1897, continued to develop the ideas of his predecessors. His objective was to separate and isolate the governing elites so they could prevent the possibility of cooperation and reinforce French domination in the region.¹³

The Past

“Un rêve d’Asie” and the conception of “mise en valeur”

Many French intellectuals believed that unlike the other European powers whose colonial ideology was founded in capitalism, French colonization offered a better life in the colonies for the colonized subjects. After his journey to Indochina, Pierre Paquier published his *Histoire de France à l’Usage des Elèves* in 1932 to summarize his voyage of twenty years as a teacher in Indochina:

Beaucoup de nations européennes considèrent seulement les colonies comme un moyen de gagner de l’argent. Les Français ont voulu faire mieux : ils ont cherché

⁹ Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 20.

¹⁰ Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 69

¹¹ Under French colonization, the Vietnamese territories were divided into three parts: Anam, Tonkin and Cochichine. Cochichine is now the center of Vietnam (Mien Trung).

¹² Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*.

¹³ Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 69

à civiliser les peuples protégés. Ils ont respectés les coutumes, les religions, les habitants et les usages indigènes.¹⁴

At the new era of colonization, France constructed and projected onto Indochina different Western values. French Indochina was not just a quest for economic or political power, the colony presented *un rêve d'Asie* for the French empire to literally construct a national identity through the built environment and spatial edification of the Indochinese cities.¹⁵ In the beginning, most of the renovations were made regarding religious spaces. However, the French empire soon modified the structures (churches, residential buildings, administrative offices, etc.) of Hanoi, Saigon and Dalat to accommodate the daily life of the colonizers and dismiss colonial paranoia and anxiety.¹⁶ They wanted to present Indochina as a model colony for other empires in Europe and an utopia for French citizens.

The notion of *rêve de l'Asie* became important after the augmentation of the ruling hierarchy who imposed a totally different political strategy to govern from the precedent colonies in Africa. The empire changed from a strategy of assimilation to association which allowed it to distance itself from violence and to legitimize its presence in the colonies.¹⁷ Instead of trying to assimilate with the native population, the empire employed different social programs under the “mission civilisatrice” to prove its legitimacy in the colony. The reason for this change was due to a new imperial orientation at the beginning of the 20th century, from using militaristic strength to acquire territories to a form of cultural imperialism in order to legitimize those territories.¹⁸ Imperial France applied this idea in the governance of Indochina, with the official doctrine

¹⁴ Pierre Paquier, *Histoire de France à l'usage des élèves du cours supérieur des écoles franco-annamites et des candidates au certificat d'études primaires franco-indigènes* (Hanoi: Editions Tan-Dan, 1932), 137.

¹⁵ *Indochine: un rêve d'Asie* (Paris: Omnibus, 1995), préface.

¹⁶ At the time, due to the tropical climate and widespread diseases, many colonizers distanced themselves from the poorer quarters of the Indochinese population and expressed a desire to return to France.

¹⁷ Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 210.

¹⁸ Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 32.

receiving approval by the Minister of the Colonies, Etienne Clémentel, in 1905 and by the Chamber of Deputies in 1917.

Parallel with the idea of association, there is also the notion of *mise en valeur* (developments, improvements) being operated in Indochina. The polyfunctional concept covered not only the economic developments but also the moral and cultural reformation created by the French empire. *Mise en valeur* was incorporated in every aspect of French imperialism, but above all, it is embedded in the urban renovations of the Indochinese cities in the form of religious buildings.

Religious Life

An important aspect of *un reve d'Asie* is the creation of a religious paradise for Christians due to the deteriorated role of the Church in Europe, especially France during the 19th and 20th century. The missionaries went to another land to regain their power and position in the country.¹⁹ The missionaries or “teachers of religion” established Christian communities in all regions and actively promoted the teachings of Christianity which eventually affected the spread of Confucianism and Buddhism in certain parts of the country.²⁰

The rise of Christianity was accompanied with the proliferation of Catholic structures, often built over the foundation of older governmental buildings in Vietnam. The Saint-Joseph (Image 2 below) was one of the first religious structures that were built in the old quarters of Hanoi; the church today is still active. It was built over the vestige of Bao Thien temple - a sacred Buddhist temple which served as the administrative center in Tonkin before French colonization.²¹ Similar to the other religious colonial architectures, the cathedral is a direct translation of the French Gothic architectural style.

¹⁹ Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 178.

²⁰ Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, 190.

²¹ Susan Spano, “French Impressions,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 2008.

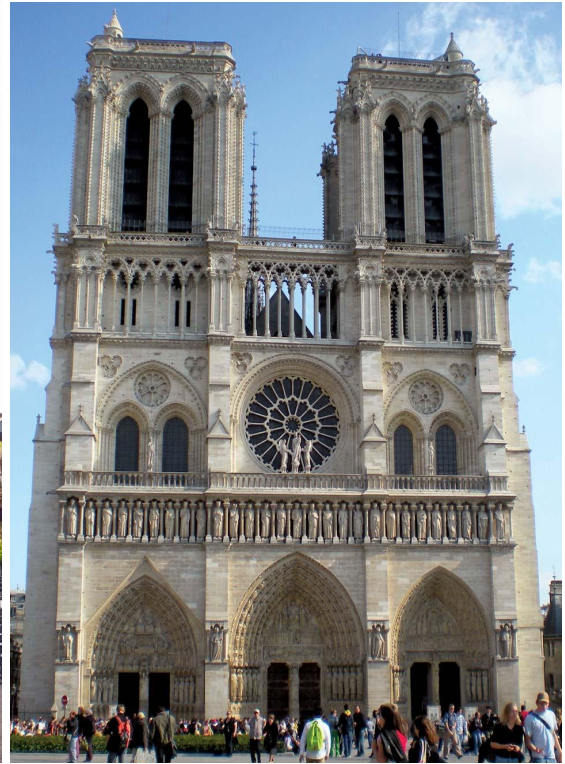


Image 3 (left): Nhà thờ Lớn Hà Nội - St. Joseph's Cathedral (Hanoi, Vietnam) and Image 4 (right): Notre-Dame de Paris – Notre Dame Cathedral of Paris (Paris, France).



Image 5 and Image 6: On the altar of the St. Joseph's Cathedral contains a small wooden statue of St. Joseph. Similar to other Catholic churches in France, the stained glass window is an important asset of the church. The stained glass window that was installed during its

construction was transferred from France to Indochina and assembled under the supervision of the head architect.

Another ambitious project was the construction of the Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica in the center of Saigon under the architect Jules Bourard (1880).²² For the final project, all the materials were imported directly from France, notably the red bricks of Toulouse and the stained-glass of Chartres.²³ The construction lasted for many years and the church now serves as a symbol of Christainity and the dwindling influence of Buddhisme in the colony.



Image 7: Nhà thờ Đức Bà Sài Gòn – Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica of Saigon, Vietnam (2017)

²² Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 38.

²³ Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*.



Image 8: *Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Chartres* - Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres in Chartres, France (2018).

Indochina was a promising site for French colonial ambitions. French Indochina was "un tabula rasa colonial."²⁴ This idea allowed scientific and cultural reformation that gave the empire the ability to establish and reinforce its imperial identity through the construction of French-inspired architectures in the cities of Indochina.²⁵ Indochina was a prodigal child of French colonization, as represented through the Exposition coloniale de Paris in 1931. The Exhibition was where the metropole used different colonial edified construction mimicking European architectural styles as testimony for its power and legitimacy.²⁶

During the Second World War, Japan briefly occupied Indochina. After the war, the territory was returned to France, which generated considerable resentment from the native population.²⁷ This discontent led to a series of revolutions and the eventual departure of the

²⁴ Jennings, *Imperial Heights*, Introduction

²⁵ Jennings, *Imperial Heights*, 8.

²⁶ Jennings, *Imperial Heights*, 20.

²⁷ Cooper, *France in Indochina*, 90.

French empire in Southeast Asia. France left Indochina under the Geneva Accord in 1954.²⁸ In those tumultuous years, despite the constant warfare in the nation, numerous structures constructed during French colonization remained untouched, notably the churches.

The Present

After the dissolution of Indochina and the emergence of Vietnam as a sovereign nation in the 20th century, these colonial structures took on new and different meanings. In 1960, the Vietnamese Catholic Clergy received a Apostolic Letter “Venerabilium Nostrorum” from Pope John XXIII for approval of construction of several churches in the nation.²⁹ This has permitted the practice of Catholicism to be more popular throughout Vietnam, and the churches have become sites of religion and of memory.

Today, many of these buildings are being used as tourist attractions, contributing greatly to the economic prosperity of Vietnam. In the case of the churches, they are also used by the Vietnamese for religious services.³⁰

Attitude of Vietnamese public in Vietnam

For numerous Vietnamese residing in the country today, many of these structures stand in contrast with the modernity of the Vietnamese urban landscape. The young generation often shows indifference, or even ignorance to the history of these buildings. I conducted an anonymous and informal survey with some Vietnamese in Vietnam and Vietnamese Americans from Orange County, California in order to gauge the public’s opinion on the existence of these churches in Vietnam currently.³¹

²⁸ Nicola, *France in Indochina*, 98.

²⁹ Đức Giáo Hoàng Gioan XXIII, “Sắc chỉ Venerabilium Nostrorum thiết lập hàng Giáo Phẩm Việt Nam.” Venerabilium Nostrorum, November 24, 1960.

³⁰ “Nhà thờ Chính Tòa Đức Bà Sài Gòn: 50 năm nhận tước hiệu Vương cung Thánh đường.” *Hội Đồng Giám Mục Việt Nam*, March 6, 2016.

³¹ Orange County has one of the largest immigrants population in the United States.

Out of 24 total responses between 18 and 30 years old, a majority of 20 people said that they did not know about the history of these churches, but roughly 80% said they would spend time learning about the history. Although this is a small sample size, I hope to describe and connect these structures to the community. I have also selected some responses from the survey. Below is one of them, Thanh is a student from the National University in Ho Chi Minh City:³²

I don't really know grand things like the history of these churches. My friends and I usually hang out here and stuff.
[Why do you hang out here then?]
Because it looks good for pictures on Instagram. And it is a popular place for young people. It becomes a place "of us," you know, the history is not important if I can have fun with my friends.

Thanh's response is fascinating for me. Although it shows an indifferent feeling towards history, these places unconsciously become places of meeting. Their meanings are constructed by these individuals. They are the places of memory but also places of the present. The community and these structures are mutually constituted.³³

However, the question of remembering also links to the idea of knowing. The case of Thanh, like many young people I interviewed, is an illustration of a loss of knowledge. For many Vietnamese people, the story of Indochina is perhaps not forgotten since people are unaware of the history in the first place. One of the most important actors in the construction and transference of memory and national identity is the family. When the family decides not to talk about certain past events, the memory is lost. This intergenerational suppression of memory furthers the gap of knowledge and memory, thus leading to the eventual alienation from the past.

Attitude of Vietnamese Overseas

³² The names in these interviews have been modified.

³³ Nora, Pierre. *Les Lieux De Mémoire*

After the wars, there also arose significant Vietnamese diaspora across the world, mainly in France and the United States.³⁴ The majority of immigrants had fled Indochina after the fall of the colonizing empire and the rise of the Communist Party. After my interviews with some immigrants living in Orange County, California (there is a large population of Vietnamese immigrants), I found that there are a variety of different emotions regarding their homeland. If there are some showing indifference, there is also nostalgia for Indochina and the French presence in the colony.³⁵ With the Vietnamese elites, Indochinese Vietnam is their country, and not necessarily Vietnam. They reserved a form of nationalism, but they would need to find ways to redefine the relationship with the homeland.

Contrary to the Vietnamese population whose families have decided not to share certain things, the people and families I interviewed in California show more than just indifference. To reiterate the importance of the family in the formation of identity and transference of memory, when I asked them to talk about the churches, several people told the story of Sunday masses in the Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica in Saigon.

³⁴ French and American

³⁵ Two people I interviewed often cited their experience at French secondary schools and different opera concerts. Their experience was very different from the general public in Vietnam that was often isolated from the colonial population.



Image 9: The interior of the Basilica in Saigon can accommodate a large number of people coming from different parts of the country.

After the withdrawal of the French empire and the rise of the Communist government, the Catholic community showed resistance due to its association with the colonizers. However, with the establishment of the Catholic clergy in 1960, not only did the community continue, it also received enormous support from its participants.³⁶ The churches became the central point of the community, organizing Sunday masses and other services. An interviewee, Hong, from Vung Tau, told me of her family's journey from their hometown Vung Tau to Ho Chi Minh City for special celebrations and Sunday services.

Collective Memory and Collective Forgetting

³⁶ One participant in my survey shared that their families would often send monetary donations to Vietnam's Catholic Clergy Association with the hope to support the activities of the Association.

In his writing, Paul Connerton claims that memories are constructed through rituals, “commemorative ceremonies” and “bodily practices.”³⁷ The process of remembering is not an individual act of remembering but rather encompasses a collective of people. It is a concerted effort of the community predicated upon the desire to hold onto the past in order to live with the present. Moreover, these rituals can also expand to larger social activities that include “hanging around” or simply “meeting up” between groups of friends. Expanding on the idea that constructing and maintaining memories is a social act, commenced by social agents, Jonah Rubin links the act of remembrance with infrastructures. In his analysis of Francisco Franco’s memorials in contemporary Spain with its connection to the dictatorial past, Rubin defines the infrastructures of memory as “distributed networks that facilitate the circulation of people, things or ideas.”³⁸ In Spain, the built-in environment (road names, buildings, etc.) still bear the traumas of the past and many of Franco’s victims were forced to live in this quotidienne reminder of a galvanized history. Both Connerton and Rubin’s works have shed light on the study of memory as vectors to understand history.³⁹ In the case of Indochina and Vietnam, memory and history were solidified and maintained in the construction and maintenance of these churches.

While it is important to talk about memories, it is also equally significant to discuss forgetting and the act of forgetting. In his latest work, *Forgetting*, Gabriel Josipovici illustrated the dichotomy but also of the interconnection between remembering and forgetting. Often, these two concepts are seen as contrasting values, but they are inherently connected, for “only he who forgets remembers.”⁴⁰ Our desire to remember things makes us scared of forgetting. For the

³⁷ Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember: Themes in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1989, Introduction.

³⁸ Jonah S. Rubin (2018), “How Francisco Franco governs from beyond the grave: An infrastructural approach to memory politics in contemporary Spain.” *American Ethnologist*, 45: 214-227. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12633>, 215.

³⁹ Rousso, Henry, Arthur Goldhammer, and Stanley Hoffmann. *The Vichy Syndrome : History and Memory in France Since 1944*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.

⁴⁰ Josipovici, Gabriel. *Forgetting*. Manchester: Little Island Press in collaboration with Carcanet, 2020.

nations, this has transformed into ritual ceremonial events and celebrations. However, we don't actually remember everything that has passed. The process is selective, often concerning a certain population of the nation. The question then, *what have we left out in the process?*

Psychologically, the distancing (or forgetting) memories is a coping mechanism for traumatic events. In the case of a nation that was under colonization and militaristic agitation for a long time, the history of Vietnam is punctuated with silence. This suppression, perhaps caused by governmental censorship, has created a social apathy to the politics and history of the nation. Postcolonial society not only needs to look forward to future development, but also to the past to understand our present.⁴¹

The churches are one of the plethora of colonial structures that were built during French colonization. These works also represent the power of the empire outside their borders, encouraging a nationalism for their citizens - the colonizers.⁴² However, like the ruins of the empire, these structures also fell into oblivion as the citizens ceased to understand their history and became more concerned with future developments of Vietnam. The significance of these works may be lost to generations of Vietnamese but remains alive for the people in the Vietnamese diaspora.

Because memory is malleable and subjective, many researchers have criticized the usage of memory to study history. In his work, Ledoux criticized Pierre Nora and other scholars for having used the ideas of memory as historical research, because history is secular and critical while memories are often fragmented and passionate.⁴³ Their arguments are well-founded,

⁴¹ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Introduction.

⁴² Jennings, *Imperial Heights*, 56.

⁴³ Ledoux, Sébastien. "La Mémoire, Mauvais Objet de l'historien?" *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 133 (2017): 113–28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44114973>.

however, the objective is not to totally deny the validity of memory to reflect history. Because it is both individual and collective, memory allows history to persist.



Image 10: *Nhà Đấu xảo Hà Nội* - Grand Palais des Expositions - 1902



Image 11: *Cung Văn hóa Hữu nghị Việt - Xô* - Vietnam and Soviet-Union Friendship Labour Cultural Palace

These two images I have cited here represent the changes in meanings for many of the architecture in Vietnam after the French colonization. They are located in the same position, however, their names, meanings and objectives changed throughout the tumultuous history of Indochina and Vietnam. Image 8 (Grand Palais des Expositions) was constructed by the French empire to accommodate the Exposition Universelle de Hanoi in 1902. During World War II, the building was destroyed due to bombing and the Vietnam and Soviet-Union Friendship Labour Cultural Palace (Image 9) was built as replacement. This is one of the many examples of the way the urban landscape of Vietnam has been modified in its history. However, like the haunting ghosts of colonialism, there still exist the residues of colonial history.

Concerning these colonial buildings in Vietnam, while some of them carry a traumatic past, their significance for society is also organic and subject to changes. For many Vietnamese, they are the continuation of national existence. And their meanings will continue to adapt to different generations. What lays at the heart of the immigrant community is the memory linked to the homeland. A great part of their memory is constructed and connected to the buildings that were present in Indochina. Although the colony no longer exists, the collective memory of the immigrant community continues to preserve the cultural values of these structures. These buildings become vectors of memory to help us understand the history of postcolonial Vietnam.

The Future

The preservation of these colonial buildings are not only for aesthetic values, they also represent the willingness to preserve history and memory of a country. Indochina and Vietnam should not be separate entities but rather integrated in order to fully reflect a diverse and accurate history.

Firstly, the continuation of history begins with the education of the young generation. For the most part, like many nations, education in Vietnam nowadays still omits many details and events from the past that may create dissent for the current government. While the Communist regime in Vietnam may not be as restricting as other nations, there is a modicum of censorship that limits access to information and expression of opinions. However, with the advancement of technology and the willingness of the young generation to learn, more and more of the history are being revived and relearned. Private schools and educational institutions in Vietnam also allow more flexibility with the curriculum that encourages research. Globally, there is also a rise of students deciding to study abroad in other countries.

Another way for the preservation of these buildings is also through government-funded programs and efforts. In the past, there have been multiple attempts to renovate while keeping the integrity of these structures.⁴⁴ With the help from the government, the public will also be more inclined to see these buildings not as a nuisance in contrast to the modernity of cosmopolitan cities but rather as sites of remembrance.

Finally, similar to other postcolonial nations, Vietnam can benefit greatly from the help of international organizations. In the last few years, many organizations like UNESCO and ASEAN, have provided funding to preserve a large part of the cultural heritage in the nation. Despite the controversies that are often associated with these organizations, it is a point of departure for the integration of collective memory, not only for the Vietnamese citizens but also for the Vietnamese diaspora across the world.

Conclusion

⁴⁴ Cong Son, Le “Nhà thờ Đức Bà đang được trùng tu như thế nào?” Thanh Nien News, April 3, 2020, <https://thanhvien.vn/nha-tho-duc-ba-dang-duoc-trung-tu-nhu-the-nao-post931323.html>.

French colonial history has both physical and cultural remnants in the daily life of Vietnamese citizens. Unfortunately, that part of history is often ignored and silenced due to the many disagreements and lack of interest. Indochinese history, like much history, is often dictated by Western narratives and the colonized population rarely had the chance to construct their stories. The consequence of this is a generation of indifference and ignorance of the cultural and colonial vestiges that persist with time.

This project and these interviews hope to provide different perspectives on the history of Indochina and of Vietnam. Their responses represent a kaleidoscope of emotions, generational memories, and also a desire for belonging. The stories of Thanh and Hong illustrate the way the meaning of these buildings change depending on who you ask. These sites of memory are not only physical but also social. They become the link and collective knowledge that connect people in a community, in the nation as well as overseas.

These buildings continue to exist, not only because of their intrinsic aesthetic values but also because they carry much significance for the people of Indochina and of Vietnam. They represent a continuation of memory and nationalistic pride. The history of a nation and the stories of the Vietnamese can be “read” in the construction of these buildings.

But beyond the question of memory and forgetting, there is also a notion of existence: national existence and existence of individual identity that is linked to the nation. The nation is an anchor for the individual. When we meet someone new, we often ask “Where are you from?” This is because nationalism is a powerful force, as exemplified in the French Revolution or the most recent Russia-Ukraine War. For the immigrants, the erasure of a nation does not necessitate the erasure of memory. These memories that are transported to the new country continue the life and existence of a “lost” or “forgotten” country.

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