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**Transcolonial tourism during interwar:  
promoting Indochina in Hong Kong  
and touristic stopovers in the British colony**

To set the scene, we will start with the holidays of young Louis Harel in 1936.

Here, he is having fun in Repulse bay with his mother and elder brother. His father, who took the picture, was an officer in the French colonial army, based in Indochina. The family spent one month in Hong Kong in August 1936. And 78 years later, when I met him, Louis still had very fond memories of his stay in the British colony... but he only remembered the beach!

I chose to start with these pictures as we have here the display of a recent phenomenon in Far East during interwar: people reproducing a pattern in a temporary migration which purpose is only leisure, following a marked path suggested by companies which make money from it: it is tourism.

Tourism in the Far East was not a completely new phenomenon. A few travellers came to Hong Kong for leisure before the 1920s, but there was nothing much organized for them. The 1920s represented the start of a new era. It was not yet mass tourism, because it reached mostly elites, but companies and governments tried to rationalize and channel the tourists, with different purposes: creating new sources of income, avoiding safety problems for their nationals and promoting the empire.

This presentation addresses tourism as an incidental form of interdependence between Indochina and Hong Kong. Because promotion of tourism in the Far East was not aimed at Europeans living in Europe, but at those living in the Far East.

To respect the time limit, I confine my remarks to elites only, targeted by the emerging official businesses of tourism. We could discuss whether the sojourners, the *déclassés*, that we will talk about just after were, from time to time, tourists in their own way. They did, not through the same economic forces and bias but, in their nomadic lifestyle, they did spent money on a marked path for leisure, reproducing a typical behaviour. They will remain marginals today.

## Indochina, discovery of a touristic potential

Regarding our subject, an important turn for the French in Far East is the discovery of Indochina's touristic potential in the 1920s.

In 1923, the Messageries Maritimes, a French shipping line company, organized for the first time a special all-inclusive trip for a group of tourists which travelled up the Mekong River and then the *Route mandarine*. With this very new formula, the maritime company kept control of its passengers even after they disembarked.

In 1928, Georges Philippar, CEO of the Messageries Maritimes, wrote, "Today, it is reasonable to believe that a tourism trend in Indochina is about to be created". He regretted, however, that Indochina has been ignored by "the major international tourist flows".

For that reason, Indochina needed an anchor point in the nearest international hub to divert the expected flows of tourists in its direction.

And because all roads led to Hong Kong, the British colony was an obvious answer...

Long before, in 1921, Mr. Bienaimé (representative of the *Ligue Maritime et Coloniale* in Indochina) wanted to promote the beauties of the Along Bay and to develop tourism there. He pleaded for more maritime connections between Haiphong (Tonkin) and Hong Kong or Singapore because these harbours were “the two major tourist distribution centres in the Far East”.

## Hong Kong as a catchment area

Hong Kong was a place of interest for two reasons. It was the ideal place to divert flows of tourists coming from elsewhere, but it was also a catchment area in itself!

Hong Kong elites were interested by something specific, a form of colonial tourism: a stay in climatic stations, also called hill resorts, in order to escape the unhealthy climate of the tropical summers.

British elites, starting with a few governors, used to rest in Baguio on the highlands of Philippines during the warmest months. The French in Indochina had their own climatic stations in Sapa (Tonkin), Bokor (Cambodia) and Dalat (Annam). The latter became quite famous in the 1920s and developed quickly.

The French consuls in Hong Kong encouraged the British colony's VIPs to visit Indochina and Dalat especially. Governor Reginald Stubbs in 1925, Major-General Charles Luard in 1928, Admiral Kelly in 1932, they all stayed in Dalat and discovered the Annamite Highlands. As a result, consul Dufaure de la Prade said “it would be easy to create a deeper movement in favour of this climatic station”.

The advertisements presented Dalat as the best sanatorium in the Far East. Moreover, the area was prone for hunting. After 1934, the French consul in Hong Kong received lots of information about the facilities to organize hunting parties for Anglo-Saxon tourists. The numerous exchanges on this subject, especially between the mayor of Dalat and the French consul, prove the success of this destination. There was even talks for negotiating property rights for foreigners who wished to invest in the urban area of Dalat. That was asking too much to the French administration!

Last but not least, the comforts of Dalat were not restricted to European colonists. For instance, in 1940, Shouson Chow, a former unofficial member of the Executive Council, spent two months there.

In a more general way, the idea was to encourage tourists stopping over in Hong Kong to extend their journey in the Indochinese Union. Throughout the period, French Indochinese administration flooded the consulate and the agency of Messageries Maritimes in Hong Kong with advertising materials in the form of posters, books and brochures.

The office of the French consulate literally became a showcase for tourism in Indochina! In 1938, a French Trade Advisor, Maurice Montargis, organized an exhibition about Tonkin in Hong Kong. He reserved a large space for tourism and invited Charles Lacollonge, President of the *Union touristique de Nord-Indochine* to give a few talks.

All along, the main issue was to ensure comfort and certified facilities for these wealthy tourists who aspired to change and exoticism, but only by keeping their lifestyle standards. Thus, the consul monitored carefully the comments of tourists on the return... because Indochina had a lot to learn from Hong Kong.

## The British Colony, a model

According to the *Passenger's guide* distributed by the Messageries Maritimes' agency to all stopover passengers, Hong Kong island, Kowloon and the New Territories offered diverse and nice possibilities. "Beautiful roads allow you to drive around the leased territory. These roads, most of which are built on cornices, spread over a length of about 150 km." In this guide, the railway was praised up to Fanling. Of course, the Peak was mentioned with its "vertiginous funicular". Last but not least, one of the main attractions was a tour of the island by car in 1h30, with a stop at Repulse Bay and its luxury hotel. The agency could arrange car rental.

In those descriptions, Hong Kong is an interesting place because of its sceneries, but even more because of its infrastructures.

For instance, let's quickly focus on the importance of the car. The development of the automobile went hand in hand with the rise of tourism in Hong Kong. A key argument of the territory for tourists was the possibility to drive on roads in good condition. The Automobile Club in Hong Kong played a lobbying role that inspired its equivalent in Indochina.

On this matter, the consulate was constantly solicited to explain the practices of the British colony. The chief engineer of Tonkin wanted to know more about the road tarring system. Hanoi also asked the consul about the local regulations on hotels' prices or the visa policies for tourists. Rise of tourism in the Fragrant Harbour was very intriguing for the French conservative colony, which acknowledged in the 1920s that it was "not yet well equipped to take advantage of it".

The consul could only regret the administrative reluctance of Indochina. Tourists from Hong Kong had to wait until 1936 before the procedures of entry in Indochina were made easier (no more passport), on the very same model of Hong Kong.

## Hong Kong, a destination

What about French tourists in Hong Kong? For long, Hong Kong was an overlooked destination in French travel narratives, it was not exotic enough, not Chinese enough, too much British...

for authors like Victor Segalen or Paul Claudel. But the colony has become praised by the French anglophile elites in the 1920s.

The regulatory stopover in Hong Kong with the French liners was around 10 to 12 hours. Most of the tourists had only this short period of time to discover the city.

As the British colony became more and more celebrated in France by writers and journalists, the Messageries Maritimes had to adapt to more demands of disembarkation.

Thus, excursions were organized as mentioned before. From 1926 onwards, when the French company intensified promotion of tourism in Far East, Hong Kong became a selling point in the advertisements, a must-see for tourists.

## Tourism, a form of colonial interdependence

About tourism as well as many other issues, the two territories, the two imperial nations were bonded together.

And interdependence started with representations. I will let Indochina aside for one minute to evoke France. For tourism in Hong Kong, the evocation of France was in itself a sales pitch. In 1921, the Repulse Bay Hotel described its environment as "the Menton of South China". Later, the Hong Kong Travel Association published two posters presenting the British port as "the Riviera of the Orient". These regular references to the Côte d'Azur, the French Riviera, awoken in the Anglo-Saxon audience mental representations that went back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. To invoke France as a model is assuming that it is an explicit illustration, a clear reference for all.

I will quickly pass on the tourist's moral behavioural models, just to mention that tourists felt more or less the same (good) feelings during their short stay in Hong Kong. French tourists were mentally prepared by new travel narratives that created stereotypes, then they were immersed in what they wanted to see and also what the authorities were eager to show.

In that regard, Hong Kong and Indochina tried to promote the same things. Photographs taken by tourists or postcards sold by the shipping line companies in Hong Kong were very similar to those sold in Saigon or Haiphong: maritime scenes and sceneries of the indigenous' everyday life, almost always the lower classes, in the great precarity of their condition. On the Western side, what was shown was the uptight colonial society in its most modern facilities.

In two famous sets of humorous postcards drawn by Gervès, Hong Kong was each time represented. First, the artist gently mistreated an English colonist slumped on a sedan chair in the steep streets of the city. In the second series, he proposed a more traditional and Chinese vision of the colony, with a popular restaurant designed in a realistic way.

That, is a common thread between imperial nations. An implicit understanding to show the exotic weakness of local nations and the harmless ingenuity of imperial nations.

The second and last form of interdependence that I would like to highlight, is obviously the economic one. Hong Kong was the main source of tourist flow to Indochina; and the latter had to adapt to this customer base.

As a consequence, the Messageries Maritimes transformed their services: for instance, officers were asked to develop their skills in English and Chinese cabin boys were hired to translate and make rich Chinese passengers at ease.

In the 1930s, offers of cruises from Indochina to southern China slowly developed as a way to unified tourism policies of both colonies. These cruises were one-off initiatives at first but always grew in audience... Interestingly, the duration of the stay in Hong Kong increased over the years, up to five days, including arrival and departure. Stays in Macau and Canton became shorter and Fort-Bayard was not even on the itinerary. These cruises were led by the *Touring Club de France* (North Indochina section) and the association's delegate, Charles Lacollonge once again, did not hide his intention to perpetuate the formula to the benefit of both colonies.

To conclude, Indochina needed the Hong Kong wealthy population to feed its emerging tourism policy and those people were happy to find in Indochina a trendy and classy place where to spend a month or two away from the heat of Victoria harbour.