

Press Release

Sung Tieu
Perfect Standard

April 27 – June 1, 2024
Tuesday–Saturday, 11am–6pm

737,000 km²

“Every useful thing, such as iron, paper, etc., may be looked at from the two points of view of quality and quantity. Every useful thing is a whole composed of many properties; it can therefore be useful in various ways. The discovery of these ways and hence of the manifold uses of things is the work of history. So also is the invention of socially recognised standards of measurement for the quantities of these useful objects. The diversity of the measures for commodities arises in part from the diverse nature of the objects to be measured, and in part from convention.”¹

Pre-colonial measurement systems in French Indochina—present-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—varied widely depending on regional customs and the specific nature of objects being measured. The most widespread measurement systems involved cloth rulers (from 0.6 to 0.65 metres), land rulers (from 0.4664 to 0.47 metres), and carpentry rulers (from 0.28 to 0.5 metres).²

Prior to the French Revolution, non-metric systems were also pervasive throughout Europe, before the metric system was gradually adopted by European countries, mainly in the late-nineteenth century. In French Indochina, Governor-General Paul Doumer’s 1897 conversion of the pre-colonial local measuring systems into their metric counterparts was part of an administrative and cultural integration strategy. To say it another way, it helped authorities take stock of the value of their colonies from North and West Africa to Indochina.

The introduction of the metric system could also be considered a part of a broader “regime of representation.” That is, a systematic way of translating life in Indochina to a common standard that could be grasped by any officer of the colony, be he seated in Hanoi or some 9,000 kilometres away in Paris.

Thinking of these metrics as a form of colonial representation is to include them alongside colonial “art”: the maps, botanical drawings, landscape paintings, and other recordings of natural history. All of these belong to colonial systems of representation, be they French, British, Portuguese, Dutch, or German.

In his 1950 article, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, the Australian art historian Bernard Smith argued that ideological biases were inherent to the modes of representation employed to service eighteenth-century European colonialism. For Smith, this was most apparent in representations of “native” peoples. These representations shifted between idealised Arcadian states of nature to grotesque dehumanised subjects, depending on the colonial agenda.³

By portraying native peoples as either idyllic, in harmony with nature, or as savage and grotesque, European representations could justify various colonial policies—either as benevolent guardianship or as necessary control over “lesser” cultures. While not specifically focusing on Indochina, Smith draws attention to the ideology inherent in colonial regimes of representation, including the role of art in expressing them. What it makes explicit is art’s role in serving an ideologically dominant class and—in the colonial context—instituting a racial hierarchy between settler and colonised.

737,000 km² is the approximate area that was encompassed by French Indochina.

¹ Marx, Karl., trans: Fernbach, David. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1. United Kingdom: Penguin Publishing Group, 1976. p. 125

² ‘Hệ Thống Thước Đo Thời Nguyễn’. Accessed 8 April 2024. <http://netcodo.com.vn/vi/52/103/Hue%E2%80%94San/He-thong-thuoc-do-thoi-Nguyen.html>.

³ Smith, Bernard. “European vision and the South Pacific.” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13, no. 1-2 (1950): 65-100.

Doumer's implementation of the metric system in Indochina was no exception to the broader patterns of colonial administration. However, unlike other measures that might have had symbolic implications, this policy directly contributed to the tangible, material exploitation of the Indochinese people and their resources.

The pre-colonial standard of measurement for land, the *điền xích* or the *thước đo đất* (ruler for measuring land), was not simply replaced but altered. Instead of representing 0.47 metres it was rounded down to 0.40 metres, in effect producing a 14.89% surplus for the French and an equivalent loss for Indochina on every count. This not only converted the French colonial assets into neat, comprehensible statistics but also exaggerated them in favour of the colonial administrators.

A practical example of this was the inflation of taxes on land belonging to the Indochinese peasantry by measuring more *điền xích* units on each plot of land. It also aided in representing the land in numbers intelligible to French colonial industry, thereby aiding in the transformation of the land into an asset of the brutal plantation economy that predominately produced tea, coffee, and rubber.⁴

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Only two years before Doumer's standardisations, the Lumière Brothers shot what is often considered the first moving picture on their *Cinématographe*, *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* (1895) [Workers Leaving the Factory in Lyon]. While the invention of the *Cinématographe* by the Lumière Brothers was considered by many to be a leap forward for the scientific objectivity of the representational arts, it quickly became a popular form of entertainment at fairs, popular exhibitions, and vaudeville houses.

Gabriel Veyre, a filmmaker and *Cinématographe* operator for the Lumière Brothers company, travelled to Indochina soon after the *Cinématographe*'s invention, making the first films of the colony. Among these films—depicting French military parades, local festivals, opium smokers, Laotian villagers, and Cambodian traditional dances—Veyre captured footage of French industry. This included a film showing the coal mines at Hon Gay and, perhaps as an ode to his employers, Indochinese workers leaving a brick factory, titled *Sortie de la briqueterie Meffre et Bourgoin à Hanoi* (1899) [Exit from the Meffre and Bourgoin brickworks in Hanoi].

While following the same composition as the Lumière film, there are two key distinguishing features in Veyre's colonial films when contrasted to its Parisian precursor. First, there is the presence of a French colonial officer, dressed in white, overseeing the workers as they pass through the factory gates. Second, children are depicted idling as the adults leave the gates before them, showing that despite child labour being already outlawed in most of Europe by 1840, France had different standards when it came to its colonies.

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In another of Veyre's films we also see children. In a film shot on 28 April 1899, outside of the Ladies Pagoda in Hanoi, we see the wife of the Governor-General, Blanche Doumer, and their daughter Hélène both dressed in white.⁵ They stand over a group of young children who clamber to get a hold of the reasonably worthless, and logically useless, *sapèque* coins that the women are seen throwing to them.⁶ While we don't see them as labourers, the scene appears to be staged—would this, logically, make them actors? Whether we perceive them as or not, their image performs a representational value to the French-colonial gaze. It imparts superiority by casting Madame Doumer and her daughter as the female embodiments of France, suggesting the standard way of depicting *La Patrie* as a woman leading her people, or as Liberty enlightening the world.

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Given it was screened as a part of the Exposition Universelle of 1900, we might presume that the film intended to show the patronage of France in spreading *la civilisation française* to its dependent and

⁴ Aso, Michitake. *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam: An Ecological History, 1897-1975. Flows, Migrations, and Exchanges*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018.

⁵ Catalogue Lumière. 'Enfants annamites ramassant des sapèques devant la pagode des dames', 3 December 2013. <https://catalogue-lumiere.com/enfants-annamites-ramassant-des-sapeques/>.

⁶ While generally used to describe any coin with a hole in its centre, the *sapèque* was also the name for the lowest denominations of the French issued *piastre de commerce*, commonly known as the Indochinese *piastre*. It was used in French Cochinchina from 1878 to 1884, then in French Indochina from 1885 to 1952. The creation of the currency was part of a broader commercial policy aimed at developing trade with Imperial China and its historical sphere of influence, the Far East, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific zone. The *piastre* was divided into 100 hundredths, each hundredth then being divided between 2 and 6 *sapèques*.

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culturally inferior colonies—its children. Settler-colonial paternalism was one of the ingrained ideological messages of colonial art, a bias that the supposed objectivity of the camera did not dispel.

Today, both the first standards of the metric system and the Lumière's cinematograph feature at Paris's Musée des Arts et Métiers as examples of the teleological progress of Enlightenment science; what remains unsaid is their employment as technologies of colonial domination.

Text by Nicholas Tammens