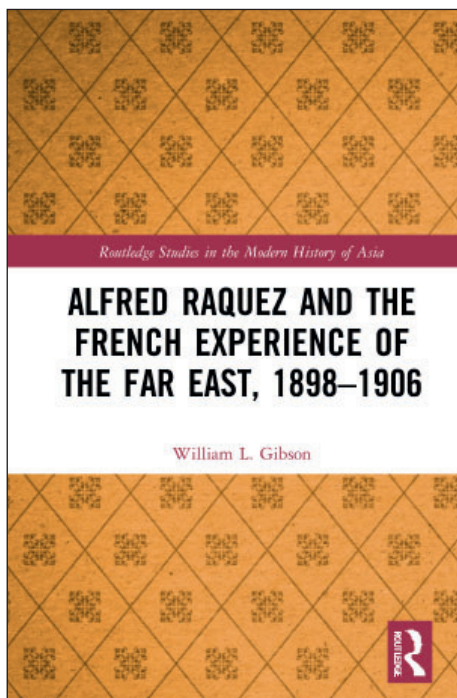


*Alfred Raquez and the French Experience of the Far East, 1898–1906* by William L. Gibson. (London: Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia). ISBN: 9780367702489 (hardcover), £96, ISBN: 9781003145226 (eBook), £29.59.



*Alfred Raquez and the French Experience of the Far East, 1898–1906* follows a chronological order, starting on 16 June 1898 in the Mekong Delta town of My Tho, with the arrival of three Europeans travelling on the express train from Saigon. Of the three passengers, Alfred Mitchell-Innes, a British diplomat, and Pierre Orts, a Belgian lawyer, were advisors to King Chulalongkorn of Siam. The third passenger, 35-year old Alfred Raquez, was a French national of no particular professional stature.

Before leaving Vietnam for Cambodia, the provincial deputy administrator, Louis Victor Cudenet, treated the three Europeans to a guided tour of the city. Raquez announced himself to Cudenet as a writer, and yet no author by that name had published in Europe at the time (p. 2). This would change, however, with Raquez proving to be a prolific writer, author of thousands of pages, encompassing books and

journalism, ranging from “patriotic polemical writing to highly detailed travel accounts” (p. 3).

The pattern for Raquez’s years in Indochina entailed numerous fortuitous encounters, granting him access to the highest echelons of society. No encounter was more prestigious or fruitful than his meeting with the governor-general of French Indochina, Paul Doumer, to whom he was introduced as a “writer keen on adventure” (p. 6). At forty-one, Doumer was only six years older than Raquez but distinguished himself as one of the youngest officials ever to be appointed to such a high position, which he held from 1897 to 1902.

As Doumer set in motion a programme of infrastructure-building and modernisation, combined with healthy returns from taxes on salt, opium and liquor for France’s coffers, Raquez was the ideal channel to publicise these achievements, in Indochina and Metropolitan France. Seemingly unencumbered by personal ties, he became the well-travelled bon vivant, who could disseminate France’s imperial expansion in Southeast Asia. A symbiotic relationship developed, with Raquez’s thirst for travel serving a useful purpose to promote Laos as France’s latest territorial acquisition (p. 31).

Mixing at formal events with kings, governors-general and everyday people, Raquez demolished rungs in the social ladder of Southeast Asia, a course of action frowned upon in other European colonies in the region. In Bandung, Java, a passing Dutchman rebuked Raquez for diluting European superiority “vis-à-vis the natives” by

offering a coin to a group of ambulant musicians, rather than tossing it to the ground like “a bone to a well-behaved dog” (p. 6).

Raquez’s ability to mix with people from many walks of life enabled him to draw unsuspecting strangers into his world of documentation for posterity. He was equipped with modern technology and took thousands of photographs, which eventually resulted in nearly 200 postcards (p. 3). From his use of other media also stemmed hundreds of phonographic field recordings in Laos (p. 3), earning him the trust of Indochina’s authorities to mount two expositions of colonial material, the first in Hanoi (1902) and the second in Marseille (1906).

Gibson weaves Raquez’s travels into historical events, to provide context, background and a supporting cast of characters for his varied interactions: an “explorer without a mission” (p. 30) and a “languid observer of quotidian elements of an urban landscape” (p. 15), who enjoyed ample creature comforts. On mission, his love for Laos was undiminished by practical and logistical challenges, still faced by contemporary visitors in remote provinces. The occasional water ingress into his zinc-lined travelling crates (p. 31) depriving him of fine linen suits or woodlice spoiling an entire case of champagne (p. 38) were some of the worst mishaps he endured.

His brand of early 20th century travel differs markedly from the purposeful and lengthy missions of late 19th century explorers, like Ernest Doudart de Lagrée, Henri Mouhot, Auguste Pavie, Paul-Marie Neis or James McCarthy—pioneers who endured unimaginable discomforts, risking life and limb to lead missions to map Southeast Asia or to assess the Mekong’s navigability for trade with China. While surveying remote Siamese outposts in Laos as Superintendent of Surveys for King Chulalongkorn, McCarthy and his Siamese officers had several close encounters with the ferocious bands of Yunnanese marauders commonly known as ‘Haw’: “We hurried over still beautiful country, which showed in every direction evidence of the destructive ravages of the Haws” (McCarthy 1888: 127).

Raquez sought to right the wrong of Laos’ under-representation, a labour of love that culminated in his work for the Lao pavilion at the 1906 Marseille colonial exposition, with the Raquez Collection deemed “one of the only collections of its kind” (p. 136). Although not overtly anti-colonial, his approach bears parallels with George Groslier, an anti-colonial colonialist born in Cambodia to French parents. Like Raquez, Groslier travelled widely and documented his experiences of people and places with passion, only occasionally engaging in judgemental expressions out of love for the people whose heritage he admired and shared. Groslier grew up “to live, love and celebrate the art, culture, history and people of his birthplace” (Davis 2011: 163) until his tragic and untimely death under Japanese interrogation in Phnom Penh in June 1945.

In modern parlance, Raquez would be an *inclusive* visitor, happily engaging in *rayonnement* (p. 19), spreading French culture but refraining to pass judgement on the host country’s customs, even in the presence of relaxed social mores. Where Raquez relished the joie de vivre, friendliness, innocence and laughter of the Lao people, some of his compatriots saw an easy-going people, peaceful and patient, but also “gullible, superstitious, faithful, simple and naïve” (Le Boulanger 1930: 224-225).

His photographs of topless women in Luang Prabang, later turned into postcards



(p. 41), created an image of Luang Prabang as the Tahiti of Indochina, with the Laotian women's dress custom prone to misunderstanding by Western audiences. I have experienced a similar reaction, in reverse, during a presentation at a conservation workshop in Xieng Khouang province, home of the Plain of Jars, Laos. When I showed a 1933 photograph of a villager in rags next to a granite jar, one of the elders politely requested that I refrain from displaying to contemporary audiences images of poor Lao villagers from a bygone era.

Raquez was not a wholly objective observer, however, frequently erring on the side of France. Attending a ball in British-held Singapore at Government House to honour King Edward VII's birthday, he was horrified at the view of men in black jackets and women in evening dress, sat on the staircase, something that "would never happen at the French consulate" (pp. 82-83). Neither was he impressed when a British sailor, dead drunk on the ground, was being roused by a mate in uniform (p. 84), as French sailors did not make such shameless spectacles of themselves in public.

Informal terms like 'journo' (p. 62), rarely used in peer-reviewed books, are occasionally found in *Alfred Raquez and the French Experience*. Some statements are questionable, like the assertion that Carlo Allegri, the Italian engineer, gave "unabashed favouritism to his countrymen" when hired by King Chulalongkorn "to remodel his palaces" (p. 84). After his first trip to Europe in 1897, and continuing with the modernisation programme initiated by his predecessor, King Mongkut, King Chulalongkorn appealed personally to Italian artists and craftsmen to transform Bangkok into a modern capital city, with a typical Italian flair, comparable to other emerging Southeast Asian cities. Most of the architects, sculptors, painters, urban designers and engineers invited by the Siamese monarch came from the Royal Albertina Academy of Fine Arts in Turin, northern Italy. Allegri worked alongside Siamese artists, as well as British and German professionals, to design and build Bangkok landmarks like the Bridge of Tears and the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall.

The notion of Raquez escaping the dark cloud of his native France for a life in the Far East is discussed in the English rendering of *Pages Laotiennes* by White Lotus Press, whose "translation and scholarship" (p. 152) Gibson criticises. White Lotus issues English translations of colonial literature, albeit not on the same scale as larger publishers. White Lotus suggested that Raquez operated in the East "under a new name" (Raquez 2012: ix), as had been mentioned in the French press, but it was Gibson who eventually uncovered his true identity as Joseph Gervais. However, it behoves scholars to think of knowledge as a series of building blocks, with writers deriving benefit from their predecessors' work for new theories or to revise outdated concepts.

*Alfred Raquez and the French Experience* is a well-constructed and easily readable collage of historical events evolving around Raquez's time in the Far East. It is hoped that this likeable rogue and enigmatic character, on the run from the French justice system, will be the subject of a full biography at a future date.

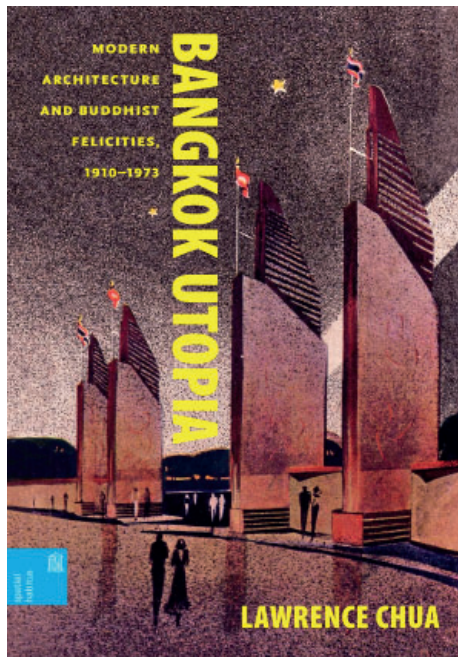
Lia Genovese



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*Bangkok Utopia: Modern Architecture and Buddhist Felicities, 1910-1973* by Lawrence Chua (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021). ISBN: 9780824884604 (hardback). US\$75.00.



*Bangkok Utopia* is a well written and lavishly illustrated history of 20th century Bangkok, based on extensive research and tied together by an original approach and argument. Lawrence Chua, a historian of the built environment at Syracuse University in New York, has enriched our understanding of the histories of Thailand, Southeast Asia and the Global South with a fresh interpretation of how tradition and modernity mesh in a Third World metropolis.

The title of the book would seem to be a contradiction in terms. As the author notes, few people would think of Bangkok as any type of paradise or a dream notion of an ideal city. Like Asian cities across a great expanse, from Mumbai to Manila, the Thai capital is a polluted, crowded, noisy, chaotic megapolis that seems to defy any coherent logic of design or planning. But, in Chua's biography of the city, an image of utopia—of order, calm and harmony—is central to the development of its space. Or, rather, images of utopias, since in his approach, Bangkok's growth and development show a constantly evolving expression of antinomies, that have as their poles of reference royal Buddhist myths of power and potency from the older Bangkok-based kingdom at one extreme and secular ideologies of power and progress that form a modern nation-state's political economy at the other. In this dialectic, as Chua writes, we can see an "encounter between the spatial dimensions of Buddhist felicities ... and the geometries of the world capitalist system" (p. 2) in tropical Southeast Asia. "Felicities" are idealised states, such as heavens, earthly paradises or moral commonwealths, that have long featured in Buddhist storytelling and culture and, in the author's argument,