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The Open Secret: Male Prostitution, Homosexuality, and Pederasty in French Indochina

Stephanie Anna Nicolae*

The French empire's expansion into Southeast Asia prompted fears that sexual promiscuity, both hetero- and homo-sexual, was symptomatic of deteriorating colonial control and white masculinity. This essay will argue that male prostitution was commonplace between Native men and their French clientele, especially within large cities and their outskirts. Male prostitutes, most commonly referred to as *boys*, were easily identifiable. Still, due to a lack of laws regarding the male sex trade and fear of degeneration, the French Indo-Chinese government could not directly charge guilty parties without compromising colonial authority.

Homosexuality and the Empire's Virility

As France solidified control of Tonkin in the 1880s, the looming threat of venereal disease elicited a series of ordinances regulating female prostitution.¹ Even so, in the approximately 60 years that France controlled Indochina, there remained no legal action regulating male prostitution. In the Metropole, sodomy had been decriminalized since the fall of the *ancien regime*. Consequently, most indictments regarding homosexual men were charged as public indecency under the Napoleonic penal code 330, making queer relationships technically legal if done within the privacy of a

* Stephanie Anna Nicolae's paper won the Redwood Prize for the best essay on a historical subject in 2023, awarded to any student in a history class.

¹Christina E. Firpo, "Regulated Prostitution in French-Colonized Northern Vietnam and Its Failures, 1920–1945", *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism*, 2021, 180–87.

home.² This lack of legislative recognition led to a completely unregulated and scantily documented sex trade.

Despite its decriminalization, the topic of homosexual relationships was controversial amongst the French. It was believed that acts of sodomy “drained the body of vital fluid and left the mind unfocused and distracted and thus incapable of fulfilling its productive and reproductive function,” driving formerly capable masculine French officials into a state of degeneracy.³ Female prostitution, however, was an essential and supposedly sterile act between a man and a woman. This legally sanctioned sex displayed the French empire’s masculine control over the feminine natives. Beyond prostitution, this gendered dynamic displayed itself in the practices of concubinage and marriage—all of which pushed women into submission and, by association, the entire colony.⁴ By partaking in the market of *boys*, an appropriated English word used to describe both male prostitutes and houseworkers, the colonial man compromised the image of his nation’s virility.

Much like the introduction of women into the colonies, sex between native and European men threatened to subvert the pre-established metropolitan social order. This practice created a “mixture of social ‘classes,’ ‘races,’ nationalities, and an inversion of gender and sexual roles” among the French colonizers; to lie with another man in any way was to run the risk of assuming a feminine role.⁵ Acknowledging the presence of pederasty, sodomy, or homosexuality on any legal or journalistic platform would be to

² Antony Copely, *Sexual Moralities in France 1780 - 1980; New Ideas on the Family, Divorce,*

and Homosexuality; an Essay on Moral Change (Routledge, 1988), 24.

³ Carolyn J. Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in*

Interwar France (University of California Press, 2000), 133.

⁴ Isabelle Tracol-Huynh, “Between Stigmatisation and Regulation: Prostitution in Colonial

Northern Vietnam”, *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, no. 12, 2010, 84.

⁵ Régis Revenin, *Homosexualité et prostitution masculines à Paris, 1870-1918*, L’Harmattan, 2005, 82.

admit to both other European powers and the Metropole that the colonies were a breeding ground for depraved, untrustworthy, and morally tainted officials resulting in most of these behaviors being quietly swept under the rug of secrecy.

The Con Gai and the Effeminate Man

The Con Gaies, Indochinese women, were antithetical to the feminine ideal of the Metropole. At the turn of the Twentieth century and well into the 1930s, French women, under the guidance of magazines, physical education pamphlets, and books, strived to emulate the demure, romantic, and smooth shapes of “classical antiquity.”⁶ Pale, with tiny waists and soft curvatures of the breast and hips, it was the duty of attractive French women to imitate art. Upon their arrival to the colonies, French men were met with native women who did not exemplify the ideals of their homeland. Anthropologist Paul Roux described the women of Cochinchine as overly muscular and sexually underdeveloped creatures.⁷ His work cited dark skin, toned bodies, and what he considered to be small breasts as anti-feminine and, therefore, undesirable features.

Unlike the disgusted and racist tone of anthropological journals, French orientalist literature toasted the allure of the empire’s Con Gaies. The 1928 novel *Sao L'Amoureuse Tranquille* promised even the most insignificant and unattractive men of the metropole a beautiful native mistress.⁸ American author Harry Hervey’s 1925 *Congai: Mistress of Indochine* describes on the very first page of his novel the “beautiful savages” of the country.⁹ Despite their characterization as exotic lovers, French colonists were perturbed and possibly disappointed by the look of native women. Oliver De Raison called them “creatures with lacquered

⁶Mary Lynn Stewart, *For Health and Beauty: Physical Culture for French Women, 1800s to 1930s*, Johns Hopkins University Press 2001, 37.

⁷ Paul Roux, *Contribution à L'étude Anthropologique De L'Annamite Tonkinois*, 325.

⁸ Henri Casseville, *Sao L'Amoureuse Tranquille*, Kallash 2010, 113.

⁹ Harry Hervey and Harlan Green, *Congai: Mistress of Indochine*, Datasia Inc. 2014, 1.

teeth” and “disgusting flesh,” robbing his subjects of their humanity and their beauty in his description.¹⁰ It is unsurprising that some legionnaires turned to what this essay will later discuss as attractive and effeminate Indochinese men to satisfy their sexual urges.

Relations with Con Gaies were seen as a ‘necessary evil’ with potentially hazardous consequences.¹¹ The women provided a valuable political connection with the rest of the native population and served as a method to exercise masculine empirical control physically. Sex with women, however, ran the risk of producing mixed-race children, a sore topic for the metropole. French government loathed mixed race children when it was convenient to blame them for the failures of the Empire and took care of them when they served to remediate France’s aging population.¹²

Self-proclaimed sexologist and surgeon Jacobus X claimed that many men “took the road to Sodom” to avoid the women. In contrast, others “addressed themselves to the *nays* and *boys*, who offered themselves readily.”¹³ Sex with male prostitutes, although not seen as a “necessary evil,” provided colonists with sexual respite while avoiding the possibility of fathering a child, a concept that likely appealed to many officials and legionnaires.

In avoiding the ‘unattractive’ and ‘masculine’ Con Gai, colonists turned to what they saw as an attractive, inherently feminine, and youthful market of *boys*. The prevalence of male prostitutes in

¹⁰ Olivier Diraison-Seylor, *Amours de Extrême-Orient*, Charles Carrington, Libraire-éditeur, 1905, 83.

¹¹ Carolyn J. Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France*, 135.

¹² Christina Firpo, Shades of Whiteness: *Petits-Blancs* and the Politics of Military Allocations Distribution in World War I Colonial Cochinchina, *French Historical Studies*, 34:2, 279-297, 2011.

¹³ Jacobus X, *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology, Observations on the Esoteric Manners and Customs of Semicivilized Peoples; Being a Record of Thirty Years' Experience in Asia, Africa, America, and Oceania*, Translated by Charles Carrington, 2nd ed, Libraire de médecine, folklore et anthropologie, 1898, 163.

Vietnam was credited to an "undifferentiated physiognomy" of native men and women. This was heavily explored by anthropologists at and around the turn of the century, before the large-scale introduction of European women into the colonial scheme.¹⁴ In his 1905 book, *Les Civilisés*, Claude Farrère famously stated: "Men and women are so alike that the colonist is at first tricked and eventually, they pretend they are wrong."¹⁵ Several documents written by anthropologists codified the Vietnamese man as inherently feminine: lacking body hair, having slender features, and dressing similarly to what the French saw as an overly masculine and physically perturbing Vietnamese woman.¹⁶ In the words of Frank Prochan, "If Vietnamese women lacked femininity, that deficit was more than compensated for in the bodies of Vietnamese men and in their techniques du corps."¹⁷ The exchange of oral sex likely furthered the prevalence of male prostitution. Boys were described to be by "preference a 'sucker of the dart'" and given the absence of an act of sodomy, along with the apparently 'feminine' qualities of male prostitutes, it was easy to claim that one had been 'tricked' into an act of homosexuality¹⁸. In the mind of the racially biased colonists, how could one claim with certainty that they had defiled themselves with a male prostitute if there had been no indication that the prostitute was, in fact, a man?

Venereal Disease

Due to the legal recognition of sexually transmitted diseases amongst female prostitutes in Colonial Indochine, many colonists

¹⁴ Frank Prochan, "'Syphilis, Opiumania, and Pederasty': Colonial Constructions of Vietnamese (And French) Social Diseases", *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 4, 2002, 436.

¹⁵ Claude Farrère, *Les civilisés: Roman* (Librairie Paul Ollendorff, 1905), 4.

¹⁶ Paul Roux, "Contribution à L'étude Anthropologique De L'Annamite Tonkinois", *Bulletins et*

Mémoires de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris 6, no. 1, 321–50, 1905, 337.

¹⁷ Frank, Prochan, *Syphilis, Opiumania, and Pederasty*, 454.

¹⁸ Jacobus X, *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology*, 114.

mistakenly turned to *boys* to avoid infection. Artist, author, and anthropologist Pierre Garnier recorded a possible conversation between himself and a recently returned young French officer. The youth complained of not being able to sustain an erection, possibly due to a sexually transmitted infection, despite desiring to, assuming that his pederastic tendencies during his time in Indochina now prevented him from doing so. Describing the women in Indochina as "dirty," the man "sometimes us[ed] the *boys*" as a precautionary method."¹⁹

Although colonists saw male prostitutes as a 'cleaner' method to relieve their sexual urges, sexually transmitted diseases still ran rampant across the trade. The stigmatized nature of homosexual sex stunted potential conversation on the phenomena as a health issue, leading to a gross under-report of the frequency of venereal disease amongst the colonists and their *boys*. In a 1905 edition of the *Bulletin Général de Thérapeutique Médicale et Chirurgicale*, physician Michaut commented on what he saw as a disease epidemic, stating:

However, we can say that in Tonkin, as in Cochinchine, the prostitution of boys is much more dangerous, from a public health point of view, than the prostitution of women. This prostitution has become part of colonial mores. Strange as this proposal may seem, it is so true that a hygienist would have the first duty to demand the establishment of a men's dispensary and medical surveillance for male prostitutes.²⁰

Michaut's statement was one of the sparse instances in which homosexual relationships and their dangers were mentioned, a statement left largely unread by the general public. To be infected by venereal disease undermined the strength of colonial power, and

¹⁹ Pierre Garnier, *Anomalies Sexuelles Apparentes Et Cachées Avec 230 Observations*, Garniers

Frères, 1889, 551.

²⁰ Michaut, "Syphilis Et Pédérastie, Fumeurs d'Opium Et Climat", *Bulletin général de thérapeutique médicale et chirurgicale*, no. 124, 1893, 274–79, 278.

the French fell to the same biological warfare that other Europeans in the past had used to conquer native populations.

A Recognizable Trade

A vital characteristic of the Vietnamese male sex trade was its recognizability. Jacobus X described the dress and categories of male prostitutes in his 1898 medical novel *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology*. He separated these prostitutes into three primary categories: Vietnamese *nays*, *boys*, and Chinese immigrants. *Nays*, whose name means basket in Vietnamese, were identified by the baskets they carried and ranged in age from 7 to 15.²¹ *Boys* were most often former *nays* who were either recruited by “clandestine brothels which were referred to as “*maisons de boys*” or organizers, or in some cases, simply continued sex work and could be recognized by their “little jacket[s], buttoning down the front, and white cotton, wide pantaloons, with a belt of red silk, the end of it hanging down in front.”²² In an 1893 medical bulletin these *boys* were also referred to as “lantern-holders” a fact that X corroborated by citing legislation increasing the number of street lights as a method to curb prostitutes.²³ In illuminating the streets, the Indochinese government forced male prostitution further into the shadows and away from highly trafficked areas without having to acknowledge pederasty as the source of the legislation.

People of Chinese origin, especially houseworkers and theater actors, many of whom partook in male prostitution as a supplementary income, were seen as a competing market to Vietnamese prostitutes. The practice of Chinese opera, where young *boys* were recruited to play female roles, was heavily fetishized by several European travelers. X described exhibitionist “domestic” sex taking place after theater performances in which

²¹Jacobus X, *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology*, 225.

²² *Ibid*, 227; Isabelle Tracol-Huynh, “Prostitution in Colonial Hanoi, (1885–1954)”, *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution 1600s-2000s*, 2017, 538–66, 544.

²³ Michaut, Syphilis Et Pédérastie, Fumeurs d’Opium Et Climat, 227; Jacobus X, *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology*, 157.

“the Chinese actors who play the women's parts, come in their costumes, and assume the character of a modest virgin, afraid of losing her virginity... the scenes of the first night of wedded life are represented without any shame” in front of Older French officials.²⁴

The accounts of Jacobus X, along with the majority of medical and anthropological sources, must be analyzed with heavy suspicion. With the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859, the idea of scientific racism was catapulted into the colonial forefront. The humanity of people other than Europeans had been questioned since the early colonial era and the slave trade. In the same way that religious institutions had used religion to invalidate what was seen as heretical behavior, the emergence of what empires believed was scientific proof allowed white colonists to justify their racism with science. Several medical writings of the

time, including the ones of Jacobus X, aimed to exonerate the French of their ‘sexual deviance.’ Unnatural sexual promiscuity was attributed to the evolutionary history of Vietnamese natives, who, according to X, were once a great power that had degenerated into a “vicious race.” Any Frenchmen who disagreed with this notion were dubbed Annamitophiles.²⁵ The belief that native men and cultures had tainted the Metropole with thoughts of pederasty and homosexuality is not exclusive to Indochina and appears primarily in documents regarding the Algerian war and cases of French soldiers raping natives in both of the aforementioned colonies.²⁶

Police Response

In addition to their readily distinguishable attire, the location and prevalence of male prostitutes, both in brothels and on the streets of large cities, were well-known to police and the general public. Nays advertised their services in the streets, a standard line of

²⁴ Jacobus, X. *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology*, 125.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 109.

²⁶ Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, 1st ed. Routledge, 2007, 127.

invitation cited as “M'sieur captain! Come to my home—me a very dirty titi!”.²⁷ To control this open prostitution along with the number of *boys*, late nineteenth-century officials restricted the number and types of people who could live in Saigon and required said residents to carry an identification card. Should a native “not possess such a card, and who has no trade by which he gains his living, [was] arrested if the medical examination shows that he is a sodomite, he [was] sent to the; Penitentiary at Poulo Condore.”²⁸ This indirect prosecution allowed the colonial authority to lessen public pederasty without acknowledging its existence and compromise the nation’s image of virility.

Heavy restrictions slowly pushed prostitutes out of large cities and into the surrounding suburbs. Drinking, gambling, and opium-smoking houses, along with the occasional *Maison de boys*, were known as pederastic hotspots, where officials could engage in behavior heavily restricted by the social norms of the Metropole.²⁹ Another scientist of the time, Dupouy, claimed that the majority of opium smokers exhibited homosexual behaviors, but contrary to popular belief did not attribute opium as the cause.³⁰ He instead blamed “a constitutional psychic imbalance and the influence of the environment” for both vices, insinuating the Metropole had been sending unfit officials to Indochina, who readily fell victim to the colony’s temptations.³¹ Jacobus X described the precaution taken “to throw the French police off the scent” of one such Opium house, the “illicit brothel” indistinguishable “from an honest house.”³²

²⁷ J.-J. Matignon, *Superstition, Crime Et misère En Chine*. 4th ed., A. Maloine, 1902, 189.

²⁸ Jacobus, X. *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology*, 157.

²⁹ Isabelle Tracol-Huynh, “Prostitution in Colonial Hanoi (1885–1954)”, 544.

³⁰ Dupouy Roger, *Les Opiomanes, Mangeurs, Buveurs Et Fumeurs D'opium; étude Clinique Et médico-littéraire*, Alcan, 1912, 166.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Jacobus X. *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology*, 108

There is evidence of French officials flaunting their *boys*, as is in the case of one such official who “openly displayed male connections even in the street and walked in full inspection his two intimate *boys* Ba and Sao ”.³³ This behavior, although not unheard of, was not the norm. More often than not, native male prostitutes would blackmail their clients, extorting them for money and “threaten[ing] to report the European for compromising his virtue.”³⁴ It is worth noting that the accounts of Frenchmen and their *boys* were written in highly erotic accounts by anthropologists who likely exaggerated their findings to display an illicit oriental tale to a French Metropole unaware of colonial debauchery.

Conclusion

Fueled by the French empire’s fear of losing the masculinity that gave them the right to their colonies, pederasty, homosexuality, and male prostitution both flourished and were violently suppressed in French Indochina. Scientific racism, along with the idea of the feminine native, created an image of *boys* that was exotic and alluring to colonists looking to indulge themselves in sexual behaviors that would have been criticized in the Metropole. These repressed desires, in combination with a rampant fear of venereal disease and non-eurocentric displays of femininity, allowed for pederasty to encroach itself heavily into the Indochinese social sphere, especially before the turn of the century and the introduction of women into the colonies. It is important to note that the primary sources of information regarding these practices are personal accounts, novellas, and anthropological/medical summaries of the observations of Frenchmen. These personal and literary accounts often contradict one another. Some focused on telling lurid, scandalous tales to entertain the metropole with tales of colonial debauchery. Others concealed the unsavory image of the empire, romanticizing

³³ Claude Farrère, *Les civilisés: Roman*, 239.

³⁴ Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, 1st ed., 18.

colonial endeavors and blaming ‘backward,’ promiscuous natives for the problems in French control. In comparison to the hypersexualized and fanciful tales of sex in the aforementioned accounts, medical and anthropological journals relied on pseudoscience, inaccurate social surveys, and significant assumptions regarding the sexual trade of male bodies. Unlike in the instance of the Vietnamese Con Gai, there are no concrete legal cases, administrative scandals, or personal accounts from Vietnamese natives regarding male prostitution, leading to a history almost entirely reliant on biased French accounts. Ultimately, France’s progressive legislation decriminalizing sodomy was integral to Vietnamese male prostitution. To recriminalize, it would openly admit both to the French public and other world powers that French soldiers were engaging in unmanly and immoral actions that essentially put them equal to the colonized and compromised the ruling authority. Thus, without legal recognition but under the pressure of intense social stigma, pederasty became Indochina’s well-known secret pleasure.