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Examining the College of Interpreters and translation issues in colonial Vietnam, 1862–90

Eileen N. Vo

When the French occupied Cochinchina in 1862 they encountered many issues related to language and communication that hindered their ability to effectively govern the local population. This article will discuss how the French attempted to establish a College of Interpreters to institutionalise interpreters and to enforce a translation regime where quốc ngữ *served as the intermediary script between Chinese and French to overcome translation challenges. Their translation surveillance system, via legal protocols, ultimately failed to discipline local interpreters and regulate translation, nor did it protect French colonial interests and agenda in Vietnam, due to pedagogical, financial and administrative constraints.*

In September 1887, after only two years of operation, the College of Interpreters in Saigon shuttered for the third and final time. The school's closure came as a surprise to the Ministry of Navy and Colonies in Paris who requested the Governor General of Indochina to investigate the reasons for its premature termination.[1] At its peak, the school served as the centre of language training for both French and local interpreters in Indochina to resolve the French authorities' communication problems in administering their colonised subjects since they began occupying Vietnam in 1862. The ineffectiveness of this interpreting school illustrates the missed opportunity the French had to institutionalise interpreters and translation even though they recognised its difficulties given Vietnam's politics, including the anticolonial resistance, and its linguistic complexity. In Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) alone there were several written scripts: *quốc ngữ* (romanised script), *nôm* (demotic script), *Hán-Việt* (classical Vietnamese) and *Khmer* used by the Cambodian residents. Verbal communication was even more challenging with Vietnamese (or Annamite as the French called it), multiple Chinese dialects (Cantonese, Teochiu, Hakka, Hokkien and Hainanese), and *Khmer* in addition to the numerous languages and dialects of

Eileen N. Vo is an Independent Researcher. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: Nv63@cornell.edu. The author would like to thank the reviewers for their useful and constructive feedback to help her revise the article into its current form. In addition, she would like to thank the Gallaudet Small Research Grants Program for partially funding her research in France to help her complete the article.

1 Minister of the Navy and Colonies to the Governor General of Indochina, 20 Apr. 1888, Centre des Archives d'Outre Mer, Aix-en-Provence (henceforth CAOM), GGI-EEII315/4.

ethnic minorities in the highlands. There was no group, French or local, who were knowledgeable in all these languages to adequately resolve translation and communication issues for the colonial administration.

Scholars such as Susan Basnett and Tejaswini Niranjana treat translation, both as an act and a product, as an imperial tool that colonisers employed to control and rewrite the history of the colonised.[2] Vicente Rafael on the other hand analyses translation as a form of resistance by colonised subjects against Spanish colonisers and their political agenda in the Philippines.[3] Similarly, Thai writers used translation, and the vernacular language, to 'talk back' and critique Western hegemony while elevating Thai culture and tradition, as Thak Chaloemtiarana posits.[4] Translation was also a subjective technology to produce national subjects through the formation of a national language and culture during the modern era, as argued by Antoine Berman and Naoki Sakai.[5] These discussions about translation variously positions it through the lens of conflict and asymmetrical power, or as a tool that could be used to subjugate people and societies, resist colonial interests, or facilitate modern transformation through the acquisition, and expression, of the hegemonic foreign language.

Largely missing from this scholarly conversation is the institutionalisation and regulation of translation and the roles of interpreters within the colonial administrative context. Departing from the conflict paradigm, in their seminal edited volume, *Intermediaries, Interpreters and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa*, Benjamin Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn and Richard L. Roberts add nuance to the role of intermediaries by foregrounding their agency. Simultaneously indispensable and a threat, African linguistic intermediaries manipulated their traditional status and colonial association to benefit, shape and influence colonial practices in Africa.[6] For French Indochina, however, discussion of translation and the role of interpreters remains insufficient. A few scholars have problematised the position of famous Vietnamese interpreters such as Phan Thanh Giản (1796–1867), Trương Vĩnh Ký (1837–98) and Phạm Quỳnh (1892–1945) within Vietnamese historiography, but usually through the binary of collaboration and resistance.[7] Still lacking is an

2 Susan Bassnett and Trivedi Harish, 'Of colonies, cannibals and vernaculars', in *Post-colonial translation*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Trivedi Harish (London: Routledge, 1999); Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting translation: History, post-structuralism, and the colonial context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

3 Vincente L. Rafael, *Contracting colonialism: Translation and Christian conversion in Tagalog society under early Spanish rule* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

4 Thak Chaloemtiarana, 'Making new space in the Thai literary canon', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, 1 (2009): 87–110.

5 Antoine Berman, *The experience of the foreign: Culture and translation in romantic Germany,* trans. S. Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Naoki Sakai, *Translation and subjectivity on 'Japan' and cultural nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

6 See *Intermediaries, interpreters, and clerks: African employees in the making of colonial Africa*, ed. Benjamin Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn and Richard L. Roberts (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

7 See Sarah Womack, 'Colonialism and the collaborationist agenda: Phạm Quỳnh, print culture and the politics of persuasion in colonial Vietnam' (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2003); Trương Bưu Lâm, *New lamp for old: The transformation of the Vietnamese administrative elite* (Singapore: Maruzan Asia, 1982); David Marr, *Vietnamese anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

examination of how local interpreters both navigated and manipulated the colonial administration and translation regimes. While it is true that colonial authorities were aware of the potential of self-serving interpreters to undermine French power, an important question is, did the French attempt to resolve translation issues or try to curb the power of interpreters and if so, through what methods? This article will address these questions and discuss how the French sought to overcome language and translation problems in Vietnam before the twentieth century, particularly for written administrative and court materials, in their attempt to govern the local population.

In the early years, the colonial administrators attempted to institutionalise translation through language instruction, which was tied to their assimilationist policy to Frenchify the local people. To effectively control and exert power they sought to make French the dominant language in Vietnam. Yet, the former administrative language, Literary Chinese, challenged that agenda because it was still in circulation among the Vietnamese elites. Linguistically, the new administration's goals were to improve poor language skills among early colonial functionaries and to train a group of interpreters to competently track translation accuracy via a multi-tiered translation process whereby quốc ngữ became the intermediary script to facilitate translation from Chinese into French. Despite language training, translation issues persisted due to colonisers' lack of trust in local interpreters. Consequently, translation became tied to the legal system where mistranslation (when the content of the translated rendition departs from the original meaning) was criminalised. Translation became the cog within the colonial machine that French authorities struggled to effectively regulate and control, along the lines of their inability to discipline Vietnamese dissidents via the colonial prison system as Peter Zinoman illustrates,[8] or to racially segregate and control the indigenous population through urban planning and development as Gwendolyn Wright points out,[9] or to monitor public opinion and control publication through censorship laws as Shawn McHale discusses.[10] This article argues that despite the French administration's attempts to institutionalise translation through educational training and legal protocols, translation issues persisted due to numerous obstacles such as ineffective pedagogy, limited resources, budgetary constraints, and inconsistent application of translation policies, which paved the way for unintended consequences including incompetent and corrupt interpreters and latent anti-colonial activities well into the twentieth century.

Recruitment and language challenges: The early years

The official signing of the Treaty of Saigon on 5 June 1862 between the French naval troops and the Nguyễn military gave France three eastern provinces, Biên Hòa,

1971); Milton Osborne, 'Trương Vĩnh Ký and Phan Thanh Giản: The problem of a nationalist interpretation of a 19th century Vietnamese history', *Journal of Asian Studies* 30, 1 (1970): 81–93.

8 Peter Zinoman, *The colonial Bastille: A history of imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

9 Gwendolyn Wright, *The politics of design in French colonial urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

10 Shawn McHale, *Print and power: Confucianism, Communism and Buddhism in the making of modern Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

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Gia Định, and Định Tường, in southern Vietnam. The French continued to expand territorially and occupied three more provinces, Châu Đốc, Hà Tiên and Vĩnh Long in 1867 to effectively turn Cochinchina into a French colony. Seventeen years later the 1884 Treaty of Huế officially made Annam and Tonkin, central and northern Vietnam respectively, into French protectorates and French colonialism continued in Vietnam until 1954. The French admirals, who governed from 1862 until 1879, faced an administrative vacuum that challenged their resources and initial infrastructure. Many former Nguyễn officials and mandarins, who were the legal and administrative repository, refused to give their allegiance to the French by leaving newly occupied areas in order to maintain their loyalty to the Nguyễn court. Their departure not only eliminated the traditional political infrastructure for the French but it also undermined an important institution connecting villages to the Nguyễn court that had held Vietnamese society together for centuries.[11] The absence of an active local administrative body and structure confounded the French navy's intended agenda of indirect rule, a model they had been employing in their North African colonies since the 1830s. Instead, the French admirals set up direct rule and an 'alien bureaucracy', to quote historian Milton Osborne,[12] that used race and nationality to maintain their administrative and political hierarchy. To justify French 'tutelage', top political positions were occupied by 'European functionaries', mostly French personnel and people of European descent who enjoyed much higher salaries than their 'Asian functionaries', which included Vietnamese and other Asians who held the same ranks.[13] Equally frustrating and challenging was the linguistic dilemma the French faced since neither they nor the local people mutually understood each other.[14] Though the French held the most important ranks, their administrative power was compromised by a lack of proficiency in the local languages. This was problematic for colonial control since as Bernard Cohn notes, 'the knowledge of languages was necessary to issue commands, collect taxes, maintain law and order—and to create other forms of knowledge about the people they were ruling'.[15] To 'conquer space through translation', as Cohn commented on colonial India, the French needed to make correspondence between the 'unknown and the strange knowable'.[16] For that endeavour they turned to local interpreters for assistance to linguistically and culturally comprehend the local people and their customs in their newly acquired territory. In every office and department of the colonial administration—from the offices of the Resident Superior, the Office of Interior, Customs and Immigration, the Sûreté (police), to the various military stations bordering China and Thailand—local interpreters were recruited to resolve communication, and cultural, issues. Interpreters facilitated both oral and written translations, from sales and tax receipts, birth and death certificates, land registration, identification cards, personal letters, to colonial

11 Milton Osborne, *The French presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and response (1859–1905)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 263.
12 Ibid., pp. 54–5.
13 Pierre Brocheaux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An ambiguous colonization 1858–1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 92.
14 Osborne, *The French presence,* p. 268.
15 Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 5.
16 Ibid., p. 3.

edicts and court verdicts. The French essentially governed the local population via interpreters.

The limited number of qualified Vietnamese inclined to work and collaborate with the French caused further administrative and communication challenges. In the beginning, the admirals found some willing participants among Vietnamese Catholics, who had the cultural and linguistic criteria that the French lacked but needed to administer their new colony.[17] The initial close relationship between the French navy and the missionaries before 1879 allowed for the pipeline from mission schools to colonial administration possible as Charles Keith points out.[18] Many of them had received a non-traditional education at one of the mission schools in the region, particularly at the College General in Penang, Malaya, where they received a multi-lingual and Western education that included Latin, philosophy and theology. Naval authorities also recruited local interpreters and functionaries from the newly established Catholic schools in Cochinchina such as the Collège d'Adran and Institut Taberd.[19] The educational trajectory of Vietnamese Catholics afforded them some knowledge of Western languages, including French, and quốc ngữ, the romanised writing script that was invented by Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century to phoneticise the Vietnamese language and which was later codified by Alexander de Rhodes (1593–1660) and thereafter circulated within the Catholic community. Outsiders to the Confucian educational tradition and society, their status did not stymie the Vietnamese Catholics' role as the new intermediaries between the local population and the French.[20] Some of them, including Trương Vĩnh Ký, Huỳnh Tịnh Của (1834–1907) and Trương Minh Ký (1855–1900), were outstanding translators in their own right as illustrated by their prolific translation and publication of both French and Chinese texts into quốc ngữ. These men proved to be the exception rather than the norm. Aside from Vietnamese Catholics, the administration also depended on people who were educationally underqualified and traditionally ostracised in Vietnamese society, such as the mistresses of French administrators, to colloquially assist them in exchange for material and social benefits.[21] As Alexander Woodside notes—the windfall political ascendence of these Vietnamese to levels of manipulative power and influence was based on foreign military patronage more than competency and merit, which had been the backbone of the traditional recruitment system for the Nguyễn court.[22] The poor quality of their translation worried French authorities, who also gradually became alarmed that interpreters 'from nowhere' were becoming too powerful due to their ability to control information

17 Jacob Ramsay, *Mandarins and martyrs: The church and the Nguyễn dynasty in early nineteenth century Vietnam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 125; Trương, *New lamp*, p. 30.
18 Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A church from empire to nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 49–51.
19 Ibid., p. 50.
20 John DeFrancis, *Colonialism and language policy in Viet Nam* (New York: Mouton, 1977), p. 72.
21 Roy Jumper and Nguyen-thi-Hue, *Notes on the political and administrative history of Vietnam, 1802–1962* (East Lansing: Michigan State University; Saigon?: Viet Nam Advisory Group, 1962), p. 88; Brocheaux and Hémery, *Indochina*, p. 195.
22 Alexander Woodside, *Community and revolution in modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), pp. 10–12.

and communication.[23] There was an urgent need to regulate the translators and their translations. The administration then replaced informal recruitment with a more institutionalised system of formal language training and examinations to assess and select the interpreters they employed.

Language policy is also central to understanding why the French failed to institutionalise translation. An 1865 article discussing public instruction in Cochinchina in *Le courrier de Saigon*, a journal of the administration, emphasised education as 'the most powerful means of consolidating our domination', where the agenda was to instil the French language among the best and most intelligent local children to serve as future intermediaries.[24] Hence a group of Vietnamese boys were sent to attend Catholic schools in France in 1866 with the hope that they would become fluent in French and promote French culture and colonialism upon their return.[25] Their journey and language progress was regularly updated in *Gia Định Báo*, the first quốc ngữ administrative newspaper in Vietnam, to excite readers about learning French and support the new regime. Keith Taylor comments that this programme of sending Vietnamese to Catholic schools in France was unsuccessful.[26] Vietnam's multilingualism, reflective of the country's different and multiple regions and histories as Christopher Goscha points out,[27] hindered French hegemony. Proposals to make French the dominant language in Cochinchina were never consistently, or coherently, supported and implemented as is evidenced by the different tactics employed over the years among the early French admirals, and later on with the civilian governor generals. Rather, language strategies often oscillated between Vietnamese and French as spoken languages, and Chinese characters, quốc ngữ and French for writing due to the politicisation of these languages and scripts. Governors such as Paul Bert (1833–86) saw quốc ngữ as the stepping stone towards monolingualism—French.[28] For traditional Vietnamese elites, French and quốc ngữ were regarded as the language of collaboration because of their political and religious affiliation while the Chinese script linked them to the East Asian sphere of cultural influence they sought to maintain. Vietnam was part of the Sinograph cosmopolis, to cite Sheldon Pollock and Yufen Chang, and Literary Sinitic had formed the Vietnamese literary tradition for centuries.[29] The French, on the other hand, viewed the Chinese script as a threat because of its cultural and political ties to China and to the reformist Chinese that the Vietnamese were trying to tap into, especially by the early twentieth century. In fact, the Chinese script later became a source of paranoia for the French when Vietnamese nationalists employed it to veil anti-colonial messages in their writing, which sometimes went undetected by interpreters who were untrained in classical Chinese allusions. For that reason, the French preferred the quốc ngữ script to

23 DeFrancis, *Colonialism and language policy*, p. 121.
24 *Le courrier de Saigon*, 20 Nov. 1865.
25 *Gia Định Báo*, Saigon, 1867 issues.
26 Keith Taylor, *History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 467.
27 Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A new history* (New York: Basic, 2016).
28 DeFrancis, *Colonialism and language policy*, pp. 136–7.
29 Sheldon Pollock, 'Cosmospolitan and vernacular in history', *Public Culture* 12, 3 (2000): 591–625; Yufen Chang, 'Spatializing enlightened civilization in the era of translating vernacular modernity: Colonial Vietnamese intellectuals' adventure tales and travelogues, 1910s–1920s', *Journal of Asian Studies* 76, 3 (2017): 627–54.

Chinese characters; they saw the former as the 'weapon to free the Vietnamese' from the Chinese sphere of cultural and political influences so that Vietnam would embrace France—their new political ruler.[30] As early as 1869 the colonial government requested the tax lists be written in quốc ngữ, instead of Chinese characters, so that French administrators could independently verify the tax lists themselves and not rely on local interpreters for translation assistance.[31] Yet, this policy was met with resistance by traditional Vietnamese elites who associated quốc ngữ with French colonialism and they insisted that official documents remain in Chinese characters, the administrative language of the Nguyễn court that was still active in Annam and Tonkin. A second attempt was made in 1878, but to no effect. Finally, in 1882 it became obligatory for public documents to be published in quốc ngữ.[32] This, however, did not mean that Chinese texts were eliminated from Vietnamese literary culture or society since they indeed continued to circulate. The new language policies meant that before, and after, 1882 local and official documents such as tax and household registrations had to be translated from Chinese into the target language—-French—for administrative legibility and control of the local population. Language politics undermined monolingualism as did the slow progress of language acquisition, a lack of unanimity, homogeneity, and coherence in language policies, and the 'recalcitrance' of the Vietnamese who insisted on maintaining their linguistic, and cultural, identity as John DeFrancis notes.[33] The inconsistency of language strategies no doubt produced some unintended consequences that contributed to the overall ineffectiveness of the French attempt to gain sociocultural hegemony in Vietnam, including over translation.

Early assimilationist language policies both shaped and informed translation practices. While the debate and politics over policies pertaining to quốc ngữ was related to French goal of monolingualism as stressed by scholars such as David Marr, John DeFrancis, Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, I want to depart from that argument to underscore that administrative emphasis of quốc ngữ, particularly its instruction at colonial institutions in the early years of French occupation, was very much embedded in the task of translation for the administration. Until the late nineteenth century most official documents in Vietnam were composed in Chinese characters and very few early interpreters were well versed in both Chinese and French to allow for direct translation of Chinese documents into French. More than a language of administrative convenience, the institutionalisation of quốc ngữ as a script and language of instruction in schools, in other words, was part of the colonial strategy to ease translation challenges. The number of people who excelled in all three languages—Literary Chinese, Vietnamese and French—who could provide accurate translation for the administration remained insufficient. The Vietnamese Catholic interpreters knew some French and quốc ngữ, but they had little knowledge, if any, of Literary Chinese. Very few French officials were literate in the local languages

30 Osborne, *French presence*, p. 89. DeFrancis, *Colonialism and language policy*, p. 77.
31 Vương Hồng Sển, *Sài Gòn năm xưa* [Saigon of the past] (TPHCM: Tổng Hợp TP.HCM, 2013), p. 380.
32 Ibid.; see also DeFrancis, *Colonialism and language policy*, p. 99.
33 DeFrancis, *Colonialism and language policy*, p. 229.

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while traditional scholars, who were trained in Literary Chinese, were deficient in quốc ngữ and French.

To resolve the mutual linguistic illegibility among the early civil servants, the French produced a three-tiered translation regime where checking each translation and its accuracy were the goals. Translation was separated into two stages and carried out by two different groups, with quốc ngữ becoming the intermediary script between Chinese and French.[34] In the first stage, the original document in Chinese would be translated into quốc ngữ by a group of *lettrés*, or *ký lục* in Vietnamese. During the early colonial period lettrés were defined by their duty to translate documents from Chinese characters into quốc ngữ.[35] After the lettrés had translated the document into quốc ngữ, another group called the *interprètes* (interpreters, or *thông ngôn* in Vietnamese) would then translate the quốc ngữ rendition into French. Unlike the tripartite translation model applied in colonial Korea, where Japanese was the intermediary language for the translation of Russian texts into Korean as Heekyoung Cho illustrates,[36] or postcolonial India, where English became the filter between different regional languages,[37] the tripartite structure in colonial Vietnam illustrates how the coloniser's language was not hegemonic as it was in Korea and India despite the French assimilationist policy. Rather, the three-tiered system served more as a tool of surveillance to ensure translation accuracy for French administrators in Vietnam.

Institutional efforts to disseminate quốc ngữ for translation needs saw a gradual increase in quốc ngữ publications and instructors in Cochinchina. The romanised letters and phonetic orthography of quốc ngữ did not require as many years of instruction or rigorous memorisation compared to the logographs of Chinese and nôm, and therefore were easier for colonial functionaries to learn.[38] The first quốc ngữ primer, published in 1867 by Trương Vĩnh Ký, targeted the lettrés group and promoted the new alphabetic script as 'easy to learn' because it has 24 letters and only requires a few months of training.[39] *Gia Định Báo* was inaugurated in April 1865 with the goal of spreading the romanised script among its readers who were mostly civil servants such as interpreters and teachers. Interpreters such as Ernest Potteaux, Trương Vĩnh Ký, Huỳnh Tịnh Của, and Trương Minh Ký, also served as editors who regularly contributed articles and translations of French and Chinese literature into quốc ngữ. In the second issue of *Gia Định Báo* in 1866, the editor specifically called for both French and Vietnamese interpreters to write articles and stories in quốc ngữ for the journal.[40] Indeed, by penning various articles about local events and news these

34 Oral translation presumably underwent the same three-tiered translation process (Chinese–Vietnamese–French) given the lack of people who were competent in all three languages.

35 In the early days of colonialism, the group of lettrés were former Nguyễn mandarins or people traditionally schooled in Literary Chinese. Their title and position became more secretarial by the late 19th century due to rise and popularity of quốc ngữ among colonial functionaries.

36 See Heekyoung Cho, *Translation's forgotten history: Russian literature, Japanese mediation and the formation of modern Korean literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016).

37 R.K Agnihotri, 'Multilingualism, colonialism and translation', in *Translation and multilingualism: Post colonial context*, ed. Shantha Ramakrishan (Delhi: Pencraft International, 1997), pp. 34–45.

38 Nguyễn Văn Ký, *La société Vietnamienne face à la modernité*: *Le Tonkin de la fin du 19th siecle à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* [Vietnamese society facing modernity: Tonkin at the end of the 19th century to the Second World War] (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), p. 60.

39 *Gia Định Báo*, 15 Apr. 1867.

40 Ibid., 15 Feb. 1866.

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interpreters actively participated in the development of the new script, especially its orthography. *Gia Định Báo* became reading material in the language classrooms of various colonial schools to help train students in quốc ngữ and the Vietnamese language. In 1865 there were already 30 schools teaching 'European characters' with 1,000 students in attendance.[41] Records show that by 1867 there were 39 quốc ngữ instructors in 13 different towns and cities.[42] In the following year 49 quốc ngữ instructors taught across the 21 towns and cities in the new colony.[43] By 1870 the number of quốc ngữ instructors increased to 117, including two female teachers, with the objective of training future colonial functionaries in the new writing script.[44] Between 1885 and 1890 there were 30,000 children learning quốc ngữ in Indochina.[45] The spread of quốc ngữ allowed for administrative legibility, to a degree that was impossible with classical Chinese literacy.[46] Essentially, knowledge of quốc ngữ meant a reduction in the reliance on local translators, and the ability to monitor translation more closely.

Institutionalising interpreters and translation

For French authorities, the first phase of translation surveillance was tied to establishing an institution to filter and screen the personnel serving as interpreters in order to regulate their admission into the colonial administration, to standardise language training and to control the quality of translation. This institution was the College of the Interpreters in Saigon and the French were determined to establish it, as can be seen in the three attempts to set one up—one as early as 1860, then a second attempt in 1869, and a third and final one in 1885. An examination of the history of the school and its operations will help us better understand the challenges the French encountered in their attempt to resolve their language issues, and to train interpreters to fulfil translation tasks, and why they ultimately failed to institutionalise and administer translation.

The first College of Interpreters had military and Catholic connections to reflect the circumstances in which it was formed. Founded by Admiral Charner, the school was initially set up in 1860 in Saigon to train French soldiers to become interpreters.[47] The school, also referred to as Collège Annamite-Française de Monseigneur l'Eveque d'Adran, was headed by Reverend Croc, who was a priest and Admiral Charner's interpreter. Croc was assisted by three Vietnamese Catholics who were responsible for teaching Vietnamese to the French students. Later the school admitted 30 Vietnamese students, presumably with some Catholic affiliation, to learn French.[48]

41 *Le courrier de Saigon*, 20 Nov. 1865.
42 *Lịch Annam thuộc về ba tỉnh nam kì, tuế thứ dinh mảo, 1867* [Annals of Vietnam of the three southern provinces, 1867] (Sài Gòn: Bản In Nhà Nước, 1867).
43 *Lịch Annam thuộc về saú tỉnh nam kì, tuế thứ mộ thin, 1868* [Annals of Vietnam of the six southern provinces] (Sài Gòn: Bản In Nhà Nước, 1868).
44 *Lịch Annam thuộc về sáu tỉnh nam ki, tuế thú canh ngọ năm 1870* [Annals of Vietnam for the six provinces, 1870], ed. Ernest Potteaux (Sài Gòn: Bản In Nhà Nước, 1870), pp. 22–41.
45 DeFrancis, *Colonialism and language policy*, p. 140.
46 Goscha, *Vietnam*, p. 344.
47 Jumper, *Notes*, p. 108.
48 It is unclear who taught the Vietnamese students nor is there much information about them as a group. DeFrancis, *Colonialism and language policy*, p. 76.

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The students studied for nine months before they were assigned a three-month internship to practice their language skills.[49] A language exam, the first of its kind in Vietnam, was mandated for all students wishing to join the colonial administration. French students were tested on their knowledge of quốc ngữ by having to compose an essay in Vietnamese on an administrative topic. The general exam also included taking dictation in Latin and Vietnamese, along with translating French and Latin texts into Vietnamese and vice versa.[50] The short 12-month-language programme points to the urgent need for interpreters, but it also raises the question of whether the students were adequately trained as interpreters. The first school for interpreters operated for a few years before closing down, although the reasons for and timing of its closure remain nebulous.

The language situation in Cochinchina shaped the language and examination curriculum of the College. Since the early students were mostly local Catholics and French military personnel, the school taught languages that these students were familiar with. Latin appeared to be the lingua franca and the mediating language between the French and Vietnamese during the initial years. French authorities would convey their messages to the local population and interpreters via Latin until French and quốc ngữ became more widespread.[51] Over time, usage of Latin as a correspondence language decreased, as one administrator noted,[52] and interpreters for Latin were replaced with those who knew some quốc ngữ and French.[53] Quốc ngữ would also supplant Latin as the intermediary script within the translation regime when documents were translated from Chinese into French. Interestingly, not only did Latin and quốc ngữ share a religious affiliation, but as scripts from outside the East Asian cultural sphere their intermediary role became central to the translation regime in colonial Vietnam.

A second attempt to establish a College of Interpreters was made in 1869. The second school endured the same fate as its predecessor—it too closed down shortly after it opened. Various documents show that the second College of Interpreters operated for five years, the longest among the three interpreting schools compared to its 1860 predecessor and its 1885 successor.[54] The school departed from the military and Catholic connections characteristic of its predecessor: students were mostly civilians rather than soldiers, and Latin was replaced with Literary Chinese, which became the language in most urgent need of translation for the administration. This departure may have been due to the deteriorating educational cooperation between the French and the missionaries who, over time, became critical and discontented with one another.[55] The second College of Interpreters also expanded its objective—it not only sought to train interpreters, but it also envisioned itself as a centre to educate and train language instructors who would then inculcate quốc ngữ and the French

49 Jumper, *Notes*, p. 108.
50 DeFrancis, *Colonialism and language policy*, p. 76.
51 Nguyễn Văn Thành to Administrator of Bến Tre, 3 Sept. 1877, National Archives II, Ho Chi Minh City (Trung tâm lưu trữ quốc gia 2, henceforth TTLTQG-II), GGSL 3269.
52 Nguyễn Văn Xuân's dossier, 16 Nov. 1879, TTLTQG-II: GGSL 2991.
53 Mười Pierre to Director of the Interior, 22 July 1870, TTLTQG-II: GGSL 2999.
54 College of Interpreters Administrator to the Director of the Interior, July 1887, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 380.
55 Keith, *Catholic Vietnam*, p. 51.

language to a younger generation of Vietnamese civil servants. This goal, however, was hindered by the school's weak curriculum and teaching infrastructure, which consequently did not produce competent interpreters and language instructors. Budgetary constraints were another issue and the school shuttered for the second time in 1874. In its place the administration established the Corps of Interpreters and legal policies to regulate translations and the activities of interpreters, as will be discussed below.

Three years after the second College of Interpreters closed down, 12 members of the Privy Council (a consultative advisory), including Trương Vĩnh Ký, held several meetings to discuss reinstating the College of Interpreters in Saigon due to the lingering problems of incompetent interpreters and their weak translation skills.[56] Once again budget limitations left their proposal dormant until 1885. By then Annam and Tonkin had become French protectorates with the official signing of the Treaty of Huế on 6 June 1884. The expanding French administration needed more interpreters to help administer the newly conquered regions. With that in mind, the Governor General of Cochinchina approved the re-establishment of the College of Interpreters, and decreed the school's reopening on 9 March 1885.[57] Students were recruited amongst both the Asian and European populations in Cochinchina, and Cambodia. By its inauguration day, there were approximately eleven Vietnamese, five Cambodian, and three French students enrolled, including one Vietnamese who had naturalised French citizenship.[58]

Teaching staff, students and curriculum

The 1885 College of Interpreters offered two separate curriculums—one for the French and other European students who were classified as 'European', and the second for the local and regional students who were classified as 'Asians'.[59] The school's two-year curriculum focused on language training in French, Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer and Thai along with some instruction in public administration. Native language instructors such as Trần Nguyễn Hạnh, Trương Vĩnh Ký and Trương Minh Ký were quite qualified as they themselves were interpreters for the administration in some capacity, or had translated and written language primers employed at the school.[60] Three local Vietnamese, among the many applications received, were appointed to teach Vietnamese, Chinese characters, and Cantonese.[61] Another four local Vietnamese were hired to serve as *répétiteurs*, tutors who helped with the student's pronunciation and grammar, for the Asian languages and French.[62] The *répétiteur* for Cantonese was recruited from Hong Kong.[63]

56 Superior Commission of Public Instruction minute, 22 May 1877, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 382.
57 Governor General to Minister of the Naval and the Colonies, 27 Mar. 1885, CAOM: GGI-EEII315/4.
58 Ibid.
59 If mixed race students were legitimately recognised by their white father, then they would be classified as 'European', but if they were not legally recognised then they would be considered 'Asian'.
60 Trần Nguyễn Hạnh taught Vietnamese at the Écoles des langues orientales vivantes in Paris between the late 1870s to the early 1880s while completing a law degree. Both Trương Vĩnh Ký and Trương Minh Ký worked as interpreters and taught Vietnamese and Chinese characters at the Collége des staigaires before teaching at the College of Interpreters.
61 Letters to College of Interpreters Director, Mar. to May 1887, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 377.
62 Director of the Interior decree, Feb. 1885, TTLTQG-II: GGSL 2211.
63 Letters to the Director of the Interior, 23 Apr.–8 May 1887, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 377.

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There were far fewer qualified French students enrolled at the start of the third College of Interpreters than had been anticipated. Only three of the French applicants met the educational prerequisite of completing upper primary education to be admitted.[64] This prompted the Governor General to contact the Minister of the Navy and Colonies in Paris for assistance in recruiting more educated French men to Cochinchina. The former advertised the College of Interpreters and the available scholarships, along with guaranteed colonial positions, in the *Journal Officiel*, a newspaper in Paris, on 25 April 1885. The ideal French candidates had to be between 20 and 30 years of age with at least a secondary education.[65] Candidates had to provide a medical certificate to confirm that they were healthy and capable of enduring the tropical climate.[66] The small advertisement caught the attention of 14 French candidates who were eager to pursue a colonial career abroad. Whatever their reasons for responding to the recruitment, six months later, the enthusiastic candidates travelled to Paris from various parts of France to complete the five-hour admission exam for the College of Interpreters. They were tested on their written composition and arithmetic skills but were hardly evaluated on their knowledge or linguistic familiarity about the countries in the 'Far East' that they were being sent to.[67] Only seven of the fourteen candidates passed the exam.[68] Their test scores show that the successful candidates fell into the mediocre to good categories.[69] In other words, the French students who were outbound for the College of Interpreters in Saigon were not outstanding students in the academic sense but reflected the *déclassé* group, people who occupied a low social status in France. As William Cohen, Paul Sager and Emmanuelle Saada illustrate through their research, many of these *déclassés* were attracted to the opportunities of economic and social mobility available abroad that were denied to them at home.[70] Their low education level would later become a point of criticism.

In the meantime, in Cochinchina Vietnamese personnel seeking to advance their career and salary took a similar admission exam. They were tested on their knowledge of French and quốc ngữ, along with the geography of France and her colonies.[71] The Vietnamese students were generally younger than the French students. Most were previously employed in the colonial administration as instructors or secretaries before their enrolment at the school.[72] These applicants aspired to become interpreters because it was a prerequisite for career advancement, especially if one wanted to occupy the highest administrative post a Vietnamese can have—that of a *đốc phủ sứ*,

64 Office of the Interior to Moine, 14 Apr. 1885, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 378.
65 *Journal Officiel*, Paris, 25 Apr. 1885.
66 Ibid., Minister of Navy and Colonies to Governor General, June 1885? (illegible date).
67 Exam Commission President to State Secretary, 24 July 1885, CAOM: GGI-EEII315/9; Decree for admission to College of Interpreters, 9 Mar. 1885, CAOM: GGI-EEII315/4.
68 Minister of Navy and Colonies to Governor General, 18 Sept. 1885, CAOM: GGI-EEII315/19.
69 Their scores were between 620 and 732 out of a total score of 920. Telegram no. J135, 20 May 1885, CAOM: GGI-EEII315/19.
70 See William B. Cohen, *Rulers of empire: The French colonial service in Africa* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1971); Emmanuelle Saada, *Empire's children: Race, filiation, and citizenship in the French colonies*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
71 Decree, 9 Mar. 1885, CAOM: GGI-EEII315/4.
72 College of Interpreters Director to the Director of Interior, 15 May 1885 and Sept. 1887? (illegible date), TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 380.

or provincial governor.[73] It is unclear on what basis the Cambodian students were selected, but archival records, and the absence of exam documentation, indicate that their admittance was based on political and personal affiliation.[74]

Chinese was heavily emphasised in the 1885 curriculum since the script was still a part of the literary and administrative circuit among Vietnamese mandarins, many of whom were involved in anti-colonial activities and consequently were as a group monitored by the French. Knowledge of Chinese, especially for French interpreters, became key to their linguistic ability to monitor and supervise locals within the translation bureau in addition to tracking anti-colonial messages. Coursework for the Chinese programme included learning Literary Chinese through a vernacular Chinese text (perhaps a work of Qing fiction) in the first year, the Four Books (*Mencius, The Analects, The Great Learning* and *Doctrine of the Mean*) and various traditional court administrative texts in the second year. Students practised their characters based on the lessons from these texts. The spoken Chinese component was Cantonese because it was the lingua franca for business and commercial transactions in the region and it was the most widely spoken dialect in Chợ Lớn, the largest Chinese enclave in Saigon.[75] The local students were given a similar curriculum for the Chinese programme but they were assigned the same Chinese textbooks in their first year of instruction, which suggests that the Vietnamese students were already equipped with some knowledge of Chinese characters, possibly from village schools, before their admission to the school.

The reading materials for the Vietnamese language curriculum drew on both traditional and contemporary Vietnamese literature to teach students quốc ngữ. Students read quốc ngữ texts translated by Trương Vĩnh Ký such as *Chuyện Đời Xưa* (Ancient Stories), *Lục Văn Tiên* (The Tale of Lục Văn Tiên), and *Kim Vân Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều). In the second year, students read modern Vietnamese literature, such as plays and new poetic forms that employed the new writing script. The compulsory French programme for local students included reading comprehension of essays and texts by modern French authors in addition to conversation and oral translations. The administrators grouped Khmer and Thai languages together for the Khmer programme where students read various literary texts in Khmer and Thai from selected authors.[76] At the end of their two-year programme, all the students took a final exam that focused on written composition, oral translation and conversational skills in their language of specialisation to determine their employment within the colonial administration.

That the third College of Interpreters shuttered again in 1887 was not unexpected. Budget limitations remained an issue. Noel Pardon, the Director of Interior, also pointed out the incompetence of French students, including the ones from France, as another reason. He wrote, 'the experience seems to have demonstrated that they [French interpreters] are more annoying than useful', indicating that their high salaries yet poor translation skills made these French graduates not only

73 Notes and letters to the Director of Interior, 2 Mar. to 19 Aug. 1887, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 377.
74 Chum to College of Interpreters Director, 23 Mar. 1887; Note no. 206, Mar. 1887, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 377.
75 Decree, 9 Mar. 1885, CAOM: GGI- EEII315/4.
76 Ibid.

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undesirable for hire but also superfluous to the administration.[77] Limited availability and competition for administrative posts became a pressing issue. By this time there were also multiple educational institutions in Saigon, such as the Collège de Chasseloup-Laubat, as well as institutions in the metropole including the Écoles des langues orientales vivantes and the École coloniale, which began to instruct interpreters and functionaries for the French colonial offices in Indochina.[78] Professional schools such as the College of Interpreters thus became redundant by the late 1880s with the spread of competing colonial schools.

As institutions that aimed to produce competent interpreters for the colonial government, the three successive interpreting colleges in Saigon failed to fulfil this vision. Poor pedagogy was one of the main reasons, as the school director pointed out in his report to the Governor General, and this was attested by the low academic performance of students.[79] Even though instructors taught independently, which was considered a more effective method for language acquisition than co-teaching, their lessons failed to instil the necessary language skills that students required to perform future administrative translation tasks.[80] The test scores for the weekly exam of November 1885 show that the French students lagged behind the Vietnamese students in Chinese, a trend that continued until the school closed.[81] The Cambodian students' academic performance was so poor the first year, partly because there was no ethnic Cambodian teacher to communicate and assist the students in their language learning, that the college refused to accept more students from Cambodia.[82] The overall low test outcomes highlight the students' poor reception of these language courses, perhaps related to ineffective teaching methods, as the administrators complained, but also a result of the substandard textbooks and the short duration of the programmes, which limited the students' ability to master more words and characters. The Director of Interior's annoyance about the French graduates' poor translation skills was therefore not unjustified.

This is not to say that these institutions failed to produce any good interpreters. The schools did in fact train successful graduates such as Jean Pierre Bonet and Ernest Potteaux, to name two who went on to have fruitful careers in the administration. On the one hand, the lack of an institutional strategy and the administrators' failure to carry out their intended plans was partly to blame when the utility of these schools were questioned. On the other hand, there were other factors such as low enrolment, limited administrative positions for graduates, lack of resources and budgetary constraints that were beyond the control of institutional planning, and which eventually contributed to the permanent closure of the College of Interpreters in Saigon. Perhaps the colonial administrators felt that they had the language issue under control with the gradual elimination of the use of written Chinese in Cochinchina and the

77 College of Interpreters Director to the Director of Interior, July 1887? (illegible date), TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 380.
78 Ibid.; Report to Governor of Privy Council, 5 Aug. 1887, CAOM: GGI- EEII315/4.
79 Report no. 34 from CII Director to Director of Interior, 6 Nov. 1885, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 377.
80 Inspector Report, 5–10 Mar. 1904, TTLTQG-I: RST27 177.
81 CII Director to Director of Interior, 1886? (illegible date), TTLTQG-I: RST27 177.
82 CII Director to the Director of Interior, 6 Nov. 1885, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 377.

emergence of a new generation of Vietnamese who were more exposed to French that there was no longer a need to reestablish the school after the third attempt.

Importantly, the French failed to adequately professionalise these students and inculcate in them a sense of responsibility to uphold professional ethics—the foundation of modern translation institutions today.[83] Absent from the curriculum were courses that taught translation methods and ethical protocols; greater emphasis was placed on language acquisition than accuracy and structured methodologies of interpreting and translation. For example, the final language exams focused mostly on written composition, conversational skills and oral translation with little weight given to written translation skills.[84] It is unclear whether written translation techniques were taught or practised regularly in the classroom.[85] It was possible that the school had hoped that during the process of language acquisition students would naturally develop their own translation techniques to apply to their future roles. Other colonial institutions, including later Franco-Indigenous schools, mostly provided language acquisition. The lack of a uniform educational curriculum and facilities within the three regions of Vietnam, particularly the association policy employed in Annam and Tonkin compared to the assimilationist policy of Cochinchina, as pointed out by Woodside, further complicated colonial language policies and undermined the translation surveillance system.[86] Essentially, the lack of emphasis and training in ethical protocols led to a failure to cultivate ethical and responsible interpreters; interpreters were undisciplined in that respect. These factors highlight the challenges the French faced in institutionalising translation but more importantly they underscore the beginning signs of the cracks within the colonial system. The French had opportunities to repair those cracks yet they continued to neglect them. The legal protocols for translation, discussed below, were another missed opportunity for the French to exert administrative control.

A legal institution

As the French conquered more areas of Vietnam, translation became more complicated when it was embedded within questions of loyalty and trust. Loyalty to the regime and the administration were implicitly correlated with translation fidelity. The loyalty of French civil servants was hardly questioned—it was assumed that they were faithful to the French cause by virtue of their nationality. The corps of

83 For information on modern day professional ethics, see Moira Inghelleri, *Interpreting justice: Ethics, politics and language* (London: Routledge, 2012). In fact, the professionalisation of interpreters, defined through codes of ethics and methods for translation, was only established after the Second World War when interpreters became more visible in the public realm as they came to occupy more diplomatic roles and responsibilities globally. See Michaela Wolf and Anxo Fernandez-Ocampo, 'Framing the interpreter', in *Framing the interpreter: Towards a visual perspective*, ed. Michaela Wolf and Anxo Fernandez-Ocampo (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 11–12.

84 Decree, 9 Mar. 1885, CAOM: GGI-EEII315/4.

85 The Vietnamese scholar, Trần Trọng Kim (1883–1953) commented that he 'did not learn much' in terms of translation methods except to 'translate a few sentences from French to Vietnamese' at the College of Interpreters in Hanoi, a school that was modelled on the same institution in Cochinchina. Kim's comment suggests that students did not sufficiently learn translation methods to become skilful interpreters. Cited in Tran Thi Phuong Hoa, 'From liberally-organized to centralized schools: Education in Tonkin, 1885–1927', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8, 3 (2013): 38.

86 *Community and revolution*, p. 108.

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local functionaries, on the contrary, was considered to be dishonest. Archival records reveal case after case where local interpreters were deemed to be untrustworthy and in need of administrative discipline. Between 1867 and 1868 the colonial government repeatedly warned readers of *Gia Định Báo* to avoid incompetent interpreters and lawyers who abused their position and power to charge exorbitant rates for incorrect translation of legal works.[87] The French validated their apprehension after some of their 'trusted' local interpreters were caught intentionally mistranslating and abusing their position for self-serving purposes through bribery and corruption.[88] In 1874 the Governor General himself even confessed to not trusting the three Vietnamese interpreters employed in his bureau because of their frequent deceptive behaviour.[89] Their recurring complaints highlight how corruption among interpreters was all too prevalent—bimonthly announcements were published in *Gia Định Báo* regarding the arrests and imprisonments of various individuals for fraudulent paperwork due to incorrect translation, a crime that was punishable by up to ten years in prison.

At the heart of the legal issues around translation activities was a distrust of local interpreters. The power of the interpreter was defined by their ability to alter information and control communication between the people and the administration. It was hardly a secret that colonial interpreters engaged in mistranslation, non-translation (the act of deliberately not translating) or disinformation, but it wasn't always easy for the French authorities to detect them. The translation regime—from Chinese to quốc ngữ then from quốc ngữ to French—was implemented to reduce the power of the native interpreter, particularly when only one person performed the translation task. To prevent corruption among local interpreters, the French regime therefore made translation a legal affair whereby penalties for mistranslation and unfaithful translation within the colonial administration were institutionalised.

What the administration lacked in institutional instruction of translation methodology and ethics they tried to compensate for in the legal protocols overseeing the duties of interpreters and translation. When the corps of interpreters was established in 1874, an official decree outlined policies including examination procedure, administrative duties and disciplinary measures to regulate interpreters and their actions. Rather than cultivate this ethical code of behaviour through institutional training, the regime depended on the law to control interpreters and curb their temptation to abuse power. This was especially true for court interpreters.

Article 9 of the decree required Asian interpreters and lettrés to demonstrate their legal understanding of the crimes they could commit during their service before they were admitted into the French court and tribunal service. Each interpreter was issued a copy of the penal codes in their local languages to ensure their thorough understanding of the legal consequences they could face for mistranslation. They were also required to take the following oath to be sworn into court services:

> I swear to translate faithfully all the written documents and verbal discourse that I will be charged to translate and to maintain their confidentiality and not to reveal them. I also

87 *Gia Định Báo*, 15 Mar. 1868.
88 Decision no. 879, 4 Nov. 1880, TTLTQG-II: GGSL 2975.
89 Meeting minutes, 8 Apr. 1874, CAOM: GGI-EEII315/1.

> swear to follow the laws, codes, and decrees enforced in the colony when I am fulfilling my duty, and I must perform my duties with caution and faithfulness.[90]

Article 10 prohibited sworn interpreters and lettrés attached to the judicial services of the court to engage in other professions because they had to remain at the disposition of the magistrates.[91] The administration acknowledged the danger that came with the position and Article 15 sought to protect interpreters by prosecuting anyone who violated or abused them, either verbally or physically, during their service.[92]

The translation regime also mandated that court sworn lettrés and interpreters be legally obligated to check for the faithfulness of all translations involving Chinese characters. Article 11 decreed that if a document was written in Chinese characters, it had to be transcribed first into quốc ngữ, and the translation had to be certified by a sworn lettré. Only after authentication could it then be translated from quốc ngữ into French, which also had to be certified and authenticated by a sworn interpreter. The same translation process, except in reverse order, was required for any documents being translated from French into Chinese characters. The final translation had to be certified by the court.[93] Detecting any error or infidelity, interpreters were legally bound to report the mistranslation and failure to report it would result in punishment.[94] The translation regime from Chinese into French and its accuracy, highlights that quốc ngữ, and the Vietnamese language, were not considered to be politically threatening at this time in the way that the use of Chinese characters were.

The potential for lettrés and interpreters to manipulate their translations illustrates that translation and interpreters were deemed guilty until proven innocent, which was opposite of contemporary French law and further highlights the contradictions of the French 'civilising mission' in the colony, and the general distrust of local civil servants. Their innocence had to be confirmed by the certified authentication of the translation. Article 18 aimed to curb extortion by having interpreters and lettrés specify the fee and format of the translation, which required that each page have twenty lines and each line contain only twelve syllables with a fee of 5.55 francs per page. Article 19 specified that the fee and status of payment had to be recorded on the translation. Interpreters or lettrés who solicited more than the official fee were prosecuted, thereby making extortion and bribery for translation services illegal according to colonial laws.[95]

Article 14 in the 1874 decree regulated how documents should be translated. Translators were required to translate legal and civil documents with simplicity and brevity. Literal meanings had to be accompanied by annotations for better clarification of the original. When the original did not have any corresponding terms or equivalents in the target language, interpreters should leave the expression or word

90 *Lịch Annam thông dụng trong sáu tỉnh nam kì* [Annals of Vietnam used in the Six Provinces of Cochinchina], ed. Jean Bonet (Sài Gòn: Bản In Nhà Nước, 1875), p. 76.
91 Ibid., pp. 76–7.
92 Ibid., p. 78.
93 Interpreters also needed to certify any French legal documents that were translated into the local languages; ibid., p. 77, Article 12.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., p. 79.

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in their original form.[96] The legal disciplinary actions for mistranslation extended from job suspension, rank demotion, and even revocation or imprisonment if necessary. If revoked for reasons other than lacking capacity, the individuals were permanently removed from the corps of Asian interpreters, lettrés or secretaries.

Despite their attempts to legally regulate translation and discipline interpreters, there were limitations to the system. One French administrator acknowledged the difficulty of the translation regime whereby Chinese documents were translated into French through a third language, Vietnamese. He reasoned that the two different translation agents, the lettré and the interpreter, were unable to effectively check each other's renditions since neither had knowledge of all three languages—Literary Chinese, French and Vietnamese.[97] For translation activities such as minor sales transactions, this might not be a crucial concern for the administration. However, it became a more serious threat to the colonial regime if classified and politically sensitive documents were incorrectly translated since it could compromise their agenda, as well as law and order within the colony. Corruption among tribunal court interpreters was rampant, a point made by James Barnhart: 'colonial magistrates …were virtually held hostage by their interpreters who possessed crucial power of language on which justice depended.'[98] Most French colonial officials with high positions at the tribunal courts lacked knowledge of the local languages and heavily relied on local interpreters, who outnumbered them. The Vietnamese historian, Vương Hồng Sển alluded to the power of interpreters by noting that they 'inhaled smoke' and 'exhaled fire' when they interpreted the words, decisions and commands, both verbal and written, of French administrators.[99] Whether it was the 'linguistic laziness of the French', as Barnhart suggests,[100] or the fact that translation in the colonial context wasn't always an 'innocent' act, as Lawrance et al. have acknowledged and discussed,[101] local interpreters found ways to defy surveillance and legal policies, a point that will be elaborated below.

Visibility, hierarchy and surveillance

If local interpreters were viewed with suspicion, then one wonders who the French authorities thought to be the ideal interpreter. At first glance, a *métis*, a mixed race offspring of a French or other white man and a local woman, fit the archetype because they were often thought to be the 'link' between colonial and local societies despite the cultural rejections and social stigmatisation they faced from both French and Vietnamese groups as both Christina Firpo and Emmanuelle Saada highlight in their work.[102] What their roles were before the turn of the century remain unknown but by 1930s this idea was entertained in a late 1930s newspaper discussion, suggesting that the linguistic sensibilities of *métis* to both the French and Vietnamese

96 Ibid., p. 78.
97 Director of Public Education to Secretary General, 23 Oct. 1896, TTLTQG-I: RST27 73429.
98 James Barnhart, 'Violence and the civilizing mission: Native justice in French colonial Vietnam, 1858–1914' (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1999), pp. 941, 1048.
99 Vương, *Sài Gòn năm xưa*, p. 221.
100 Barnhart, 'Violence and the civilizing mission', p. 941.
101 Lawrance et al., *Intermediaries, interpreters, and clerks*, p. 11.
102 Saada, *Empire's children*, p. 17; Christina Firpo, *The uprooted: Race, children and imperialism in French Indochina, 1890–1980* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

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languages would make them ideal interpreters for the colonial administration.[103] The article wrote: 'Take for example: *may may may* means, "You sew with a machine!" Few "French" ears can hear the difference in intonation that distinguishes these three words of one syllable. By contrast, it would be difficult for an Annamite [Vietnamese] to interpret correctly.'[104] The social discourse seems to imply that neither a French or Vietnamese person would make ideal interpreters because of their inability to master the subtle nuances of each other's language. Because of their 'hybrid' position, *métis* were more capable of understanding and speaking both French and Vietnamese better than a French or a Vietnamese person could, they naturally make good interpreters for the administration. Contrary to this view, there were few *métis* of Vietnamese and French heritage working as interpreters, at least formally employed by the colonial administration, to support this assumption. *Métis* may have worked in other sectors such as the Indochinese police force, of which they occupied 35 per cent of the posts by 1941, but their assumed 'mastery of both languages' was not sought after for interpreting positions.[105]

Within the translation regime and its distribution of power, French interpreters enjoyed a higher administrative rank and salary and were also assigned more important responsibilities. In 1874 the Director of Interior established the corps of European interpreters in Cochinchina to handle important and confidential affairs.[106] By 1877 the corps of European interpreters comprised of four distinguished French interpreters: Jean Pierre Bonet, Ernest Potteaux, Barthelemy Ballon and Francois Huc. They were all well-versed in the local languages: Vietnamese, Chinese characters, quốc ngữ and Khmer.[107] These men were charged with the key tasks of structuring language curriculum and examinations, writing language primers to train both local and French students, drafting and translating employment policies and regulations, in addition to heading various examination committees.[108] French interpreters, such as Ernest Potteaux, even accompanied Vietnamese ambassadors on political missions to France such as when he accompanied the sons of Phan Thanh Giản to France in 1873 to advance the French civilising mission agenda.[109]

Translation duties were also divided among the French and local interpreters based on the confidentiality of the material. Local interpreters were mostly given translation assignments that were more administrative and basic such as sales receipts and birth and death certificates. Classified information, and the potential clandestine messages embedded within it, was assigned to French interpreters.[110] The visibility of a French interpreter within the translation bureau was central because they symbolised administrative surveillance. Highly skilled French interpreters were often assigned multiple posts in various offices and departments to supervise translation activities, especially during the period of indigenisation of colonial staff, a programme

103 Saada, *Empire's children*, p. 227.
104 As quoted in Saada, ibid.
105 Ibid., p. 51. There is little or no record of *métis* students at the interpreting colleges in Cochinchina.
106 Draft of the decree adopted by the council, 8 Apr. 1874, CAOM: GGI-EEII315/1.
107 Decision no. 615, 5 Aug. 1877, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 3892.
108 Decision no. 874, 19 Sept. 1874, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 1542.
109 Ernest Potteaux to Director of Interior, 26 Mar. 1874, TTLTQG-II: GGSL 3892.
110 Resident Superior of Tonkin to Governor General, 8 May 1908, TTLTQG-I: RST 19287.

implemented to reduce the colonial budget.[111] One French interpreter simultaneously served the Inspector of Saigon, the Court of Appeal, the Bureau of Interpreters, and the Direction of the Interior.[112] Complaints of overwork were common among these in-demand French interpreters.

The penalties for mistranslation and surveillance of translators were not always effectively implemented. Translation surveillance, similar to the colonial prison system and the censorship regime employed by the Sûreté to discipline and control the colonial population that both Zinoman and McHale discussed, respectively, was largely unsuccessful.[113] Even though legal protocols for translation were established in the early decades of colonial rule they were not always strictly followed. This created opportunities for self-serving lettrés and interpreters to illicitly collaborate with each other, and also with the local people, to deliberately undermine and resist colonial authority, a defiance that is synonymous with Rafael and Chaloemtiarana's discussion on translation.[114] In fact, the French continued to struggle with self-serving interpreters well into the twentieth century. A 1909 criminal case relating to mistranslation by Nguyễn Đinh Lâm, a secretary-interpreter, and the lettré, Ngô Vi Khôi, underscores the general weakness of the colonial translation surveillance system and the authorities' inability to eradicate the illegal activities of corrupt local interpreters. Khôi accepted a bribe to reduce the prison sentence of a villager, Nguyễn Văn Dân, for his crime of extortion, when Khôi translated the verdict from Chinese into quốc ngữ. Lâm, perhaps due to his inability to read Chinese, did not catch the mistranslation when he translated the quốc ngữ rendition into French. It was only when the local people noticed Dân's early release and alerted the Resident Superior to review his legal case that the French administration became aware of the intentional mistranslation and arrested both the interpreter and lettré for their involvement.[115] This is only one of many documented examples of how interpreters and lettrés took advantage of the administration's linguistic failures and manipulated translations to their own ends. Mistranslation was sometimes simply due to incompetence, a result of poor training, and the interpreters were too embarrassed to acknowledge their ineptitude during the translation or while checking its accuracy.[116] While interpreters were infamous for being mischievous and deceitful, catching them in the act of mistranslation was not always easy. The French interpreters who were supposed to surveil local interpreters and oversee translation confidentiality did not always succeed in their duty. Their linguistic limitations allowed local interpreters to become skilled at a legal cat and mouse game by collaborating with each other and concealing their premeditated mistranslations from the administration, which itself was a latent

111 Boscq Jean Cyprien performance report, 1 Dec. 1889, CAOM: GGI- EEII597/6. See also Paul Michael Sager, 'Indigenizing Indochina: Race, class, and the French colonial employer-state, 1848–1945' (PhD diss., New York University, 2014).
112 Ballon to Attorney General, 12 Nov. 1880, TTLTQG-II: Goucoch 1542.
113 See Zinoman, *A colonial Bastille*; McHale, *Print and power.*
114 See Rafael, *Contracting colonialism and* Chaloemtiarana, 'Making new space'.
115 Administrator of Phú Thọ to Resident Superior of Tonkin, 9 Nov. 1909, TTLTQG-1: RST 37455, Nguyễn Định Lâm to Resident Superior of Tonkin, 22 Dec. 1909; Decree no. 37, 5 Mar. 1910. TTLTQG-I: RST 37455.
116 Nguyễn Hat Toán's dossier, 1 Sept. 1894, TTLTQG-I: RST 51604.

impact of the inconsistent language and translation policies implemented during the germinal years of French colonialism.

Conclusion

Translation issues in the early years of the French occupation of Indochina were a byproduct of their unsuccessful and inconsistent language policies. Translation was an entrenched problem that the French struggled to overcome in colonial Vietnam largely due to their inability to effectively institutionalise it from the start. Translation policies were inconsistently applied and regulated; local interpreters and their self-serving agendas continued to be a challenge for the French to manage and discipline over the decades. The surveillance measures that the French attempted to set up, either through the multi-tiered translation regime, legal punishment or the symbolic figure of the French interpreter, proved more difficult to enforce than envisioned. Like the fate of the College of Interpreters, the administration often faced budgetary constraints that restricted them from successfully extending their control over the local population via translation. Had the College of Interpreters continued to operate and effectively train skilled, trustworthy, and disciplined interpreters, and had the legal protocols for translation been consistently enforced and adhered, would the story of translation and colonialism in Vietnam have played out differently? Mistranslation, and non-translation, could and did threaten and undermine colonial interests and authority. It also makes us question how many cases of mistranslation went unchecked by the colonial administration and with what ramifications.

Epilogue

The absence of an effective institutionalisation of interpreters and regulation of the translation regime had underlying impacts and unintended consequences by the turn of the century. Translation issues and their potential for violence were not uniformly acknowledged. During his tenure, Governor General Paul Beau (1902–07) had proposed to reintroduce the teaching of Chinese in Cochinchina for translation purposes, but his proposal was rejected on the premise that Chinese was no longer widely employed, and this decision was further supported by H. De Lamothe, the Lieutenant Governor of Cochinchina, in 1906.[117] Yet, several years later, a report from the Resident Superior of Tonkin to the Governor General highlights the continued threat of Chinese, the deficiencies of the translation bureau and the urgent need to improve it. The 1908 report discussed the rise of the 'yellow movement' (*cercle jaune*), referring to the penetration of Chinese reformist literature into Vietnam, which the French authorities associated with the increase in anti-colonial activities in the country. Traditional character schools became a target of surveillance. These schools became potential sites of anti-French activities, as indicated in the increased reports of Vietnamese teachers hiding historical allusions and other 'intended messages to instil hatred for the foreigners' in their Chinese character homework to foster anti-colonial sentiments among their students. The Resident Superior wanted French interpreters to inspect the Chinese language textbooks for

117 DeFrancis, *Colonialism and language policy*, p. 177.

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any subversive messages.[118] Their paranoia was not unwarranted. In fact, the intentional un-translatability within Chinese documents where literary allusions were deliberately employed to mask incendiary messages became a powerful weapon for political dissidents. Lorraine Paterson discusses how French authorities and their interpreters failed to 'constrain cultural and political flows' due to their linguistic limitations, which prevented them from detecting veiled political commentary in letters sent back to Vietnam by political exiles overseas.[119] The cloaking of political messages became a source of anxiety for the French authorities who were not able to read Chinese, let alone detect or decode concealed classical Chinese allusions.

The weak translation policies implemented during the early days of French Indochina paved the way for anti-colonial literature to penetrate and spread in Vietnam. In fact, by the early twentieth century, Vietnamese revolutionaries were able to smuggle in Chinese reformist literature by Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) that helped to galvanise anti-colonial sentiments and instigate various revolts against French rule. Sometimes their works were covertly imported into Vietnam by Chinese residents who served as intermediaries between the Chinese revolutionaries and the Vietnamese.[120] To combat this issue, the Resident Superior of Tonkin proposed the creation of a special corps of European interpreters to oversee the translation of suspicious Chinese literature to uncover any 'development of new ideas that they [the authors of the brochures] express, and especially the sentiments they reveal'.[121] Yet, the Resident Superior lamented that the language skills of the regular French functionaries were too basic to detect the nuanced intent and subversive messages camouflaged in these documents. He opined that Vietnamese interpreters could not be trusted with this surveillance task due to the confidential nature of these documents. The special corps of European interpreters he wanted to establish would manage and supervise the translation of classified documents and administrative texts such as royal ordinances (*hội điển*). They would also be charged with editing and censoring journals written in Chinese while combing through Chinese journals from Shanghai, Hong Kong, Peking and Japan to detect for potential conflicts of interest with the French administration.[122]

The ability to decipher anti-colonial texts did sometimes thwart potential threats and conflicts. For example, through his translation of coded correspondence, one French interpreter suppressed a conspiracy called 'Bomb' in 1912. The plot was conspired in Bangkok and Hong Kong against the colonial government in Cochinchina. According to reports, the plot was orchestrated by the Société des martyrs, an anti-colonial group, whose members were planning to plant bombs in prominent government buildings such as the Palace of the Governor General and other public places

118 Chief of the Cabinet to Governor General, 21 May 1908, TTLTQG-I: RST 19287.

119 Lorraine Paterson, 'Prisoners from Indochina in the nineteenth-century French colonial world', in *Exile in colonial Asia: Kings, convicts, commemoration*, ed. Ronit Ricci (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), pp. 229–30.

120 Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were the leaders of the failed Hundred Days' Reform of 1898 in China who demanded changes and reforms to Chinese social and political institutions. Marr, *Vietnamese anti-colonialism*, p. 125.

121 Report from Resident Superior of Tonkin to Governor General, 8 May 1908, TTLTQG-I: RST 19287.

122 Ibid.

such as hospitals, military barracks and cafés. Detecting their plot, the French interpreter alerted the Chief of the Cabinet who had the Sûreté arrest the group. Translation in this case averted bombings in Cochinchina that could have resulted in a large European death toll.[123] Yet these politically subversive messages were not always detected, which enabled various assassinations and bombings in 1913, as a case in point, led by the nationalist Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940) and the Vietnamese Restoration Society.[124]

In the end this special corps of European interpreters was not officially established due to budgetary constraints and operational issues. The report however highlights the regime's awareness as well as their anxiety about the increase in clandestine traffic of anti-colonial literature and underground revolutionary activities sparked by the Chinese New Learning movement and its infiltration into Vietnam.[125] Once again French administrators were aware of the weaknesses of the translation bureau and the need to improve language competency among their interpreters, yet, once again they disregarded its urgency. Governor General Albert Sarraut's attempt to police and censor publications and the circulation of information via the Sûréte in the 1910s was ultimately ineffective due to the prolonged negligence and indifference of administrators to repair the shortcomings within the colonial system, especially those relating to language and translation issues. By then these problems had become too entrenched and too difficult to resolve.

Moreover, the role of quốc ngữ in translation, whether it was used as an intermediary script or as a targeted language for the translation of French, Chinese and Japanese texts, over time elevated quốc ngữ to the status of national writing script for Vietnam by the mid-twentieth century. The French never anticipated that the Vietnamese would use one of their colonial apparatuses against them. Quốc ngữ became the vehicle for Vietnamese writers to construct a national literature via the translation of a 'vernacular modernity' that Yufen Chang discusses in her work.[126] Vietnamese nationals such as Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh (1882–1932) and Phạm Quỳnh (1892–1945), who were graduates of the interpreting school in Hanoi, promoted quốc ngữ as the main writing script for the Vietnamese language through journalistic translations—a topic that deserves more research. In the 1930s urban nationalists launched various campaigns to disseminate quốc ngữ among the masses, including the Association for the Dissemination of Quốc Ngữ (Hội Truyền Bá Chữ Quốc Ngữ) in 1938, and in the process helped to democratise the writing script in Vietnam, as Goscha points out.[127] Indeed, quốc ngữ not only promoted wider literacy but gave the Vietnamese more access to critical information about the colonial administration that over time fomented into anti-French sentiment. Vietnamese anti-colonialism, sometimes propagated through clandestine Chinese texts, would continue to grow and would culminate in violent uprisings, revolution and a war that eventually undermined and toppled French colonialism by 1954.

123 Jean Boscq to the Governor General of Indochina, 1 June 1912, CAOM: GGI-EEII5967/6.
124 Taylor, *History of the Vietnamese*, p. 493.
125 Report from Resident Superior of Tonkin to Governor General, 10 July 1910, TTLTQG-I: RST 19287.
126 Chang, 'Vernacular modernity', pp. 629–30.
127 Goscha, *Vietnam*, p. 346.

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