

Fieldwork Research Report Hanoi (Pin-Hua Chou, UCLA History PhD candidate) Spring 2026

EFEO Hanoi Center / National Library / National Archives I

Overview of Institutions Visited

During this fieldwork period I worked primarily at the EFEO Hanoi Center Library, the National Library of Vietnam, and National Archives Center I. I also visited the Vietnamese Women's Museum, the National Museum of Fine Arts, and the Nguyễn Văn Huyền Museum. Because photography was restricted in many collections in National Library and National Archive, a large portion of research time was devoted to manual transcription and note-taking. EFEO Hanoi Centre Director Philippe Le Failler also introduced me to several secondary sources highly relevant to my research.

Primary Sources

The materials listed below are those most directly relevant to my research. I have also gathered additional archival materials that, while not central to my current project, bear some relation to it, such as documentation on other genres of exhibition held in Vietnam during the same period, including a 1943 book and literature exhibition catalogue written in Quốc ngữ.

— Hội Chợ Triển Lãm Saigon 1942–1943 Catalogue

National Library of Vietnam (photography not permitted — full transcription).

Official illustrated catalogue of the Hội Chợ Triển Lãm Saigon năm 1942–1943, published by Nhà xuất bản Đại Nam (Dainam Publishing House), Saigon.

Key Findings

Tripartite address: The catalogue is written simultaneously for French administrators (Governor-General's speech, propaganda sections), Vietnamese collaborators (Vietnamese-language text, Vietnamese-authored articles, pavilions on craftsmanship), and Japanese partners (Nippon pavilion, five full pages, more than any other section). These modes of address coexist in a single bound object, making the catalogue itself a site of negotiation rather than a stable French-authored knowledge package.

The Nippon Pavilion (pp. 12–19) — asymmetric co-representation: Japan’s five-page coverage dwarfs the two pages for Saigon-Cholon and one for the EFEO. Photographs were produced through a competition organized by the Nippon Committee, meaning Japan actively shaped its own representation within a French-organized space. The Vietnamese-language description (pp. 16–17) frames Japanese-Vietnamese commercial relations as rooted in seventeenth-century trade via Quảng-Nam, bypassing the military occupation. Goods highlighted, Mikimoto pearls, Hitachi machinery, the Taiwan tea pavilion staffed by Vietnamese women, project technological modernity and inter-Asian partnership. Korean and Taiwanese goods gesture toward the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere without naming it.

Dual coding of colonial knowledge (EFEO pavilion, p. 39, vs. surrounding pavilions): The EFEO pavilion frames Cham towers, Khmer stele, and highland material culture as heritage requiring scholarly stewardship. The adjacent Agriculture, Handicrafts, and Commerce pavilions frame the same territories and peoples as resources and tradeable goods. The Mùòng appear both as Tourism spectacle (greeting visitors) and as Handicrafts producers. The History pavilion’s description of the Thủy-Chân-Lạp as a people who “once inhabited Nam-Kỳ” performs the temporal freezing that clears territory for development. The two registers are mutually reinforcing: EFEO ethnological authority legitimizes commercial claims, the fair’s economic vitality justifies EFEO preservation.

Vietnamese constrained agency: Hồ-Duy-Kiên’s preface uses classical literary allusions to perform both cultural sophistication and loyalty. Huỳnh Tấn Phát’s Beaux-Arts essay articulates a distinctly Vietnamese aesthetic identity, not Chinese, not Western (biệt lập một vận mạng riêng), within a French colonial commercial publication endorsed by the Governor-General’s committee. An anonymous Vietnamese author narrates the Nippon pavilion with apparent admiration framed to comment implicitly on Indochina’s own economic position. The French framework required Vietnamese voices for legitimacy, those voices used the platform to exceed French intent.

Decoux’s Vichy framing and its contradictions: The speech explicitly invokes travail, famille, patrie, the propaganda section references Pétain’s Révolution Nationale. The fair claims Indochina’s wartime economic self-sufficiency. Yet Decoux simultaneously praises Franco-Vietnamese architectural collaboration, congratulates Japan Ambassador Yoshizawa personally, and frames Japanese co-presence as demonstrating “excellent relations.” Vichy iconography (Pétain portraits, Légion française pavilion) coexists with Japanese claims to technological

superiority and inter-Asian solidarity, the representational doubleness required by Decoux's actual political position.

— **Exhibition Catalogue “L’Indochine dans le Passé” (1941 Hanoi Trade Fair)**

EFEO Hanoi Center Library.

Paul Boudet, *L’Indochine dans le Passé*, XXXVIIIth Cahier of the Société de Géographie de Hanoi. Catalogue of the historical documentary exhibition organized for the 1941 Hanoi Trade Fair, published by Director of Archives and Libraries.

Key Findings

The structural paradox: history inside a trade fair: Boudet presents the insertion of a historical exhibition into a commercial occasion as natural, Decoux's gift of “the past alongside the achievements of the present.” But the pairing is theoretically significant, it constitutes heritage as the foundation of economic productivity, staging the cultural and extractive registers together under the same roof.

Narrative of Annamite expansion and colonial teleology: Four dynastic maps trace Vietnam's southward expansion at Champa's expense, France is framed as stabilizing what Annamite sovereigns could not complete alone. Champa appears as territory, then disappears once absorbed, the exhibition performs the erasure it describes. The six-section structure encodes a teleological sequence: Ancient Maps, Travelers and Missionaries, Annam/Cambodia/Laos of Bygone Days, First Franco-Annamite Collaboration, French Indochina, The Cities, ending with urban modernity (Hanoi, Saigon, Phnom Penh) as the proof of collaboration's success.

Vichy ideology and the resort to history: Boudet opens: “this sad year of 1941 which draws to a close amid the sufferings born of war, and the fears of a future heavy with threats.” History is deployed as “a high lesson and an act of faith”, Vichy resort to a glorious past as moral resource, with faith directed specifically at Franco-Indochinese collaboration and figures like Paul Doumer. The exhibition does ideological work for French colonial legitimacy at the precise moment Japan has already compelled basing rights and economic concessions since 1940.

Japan's conspicuous absence: Despite covering from Ptolemy to the early twentieth century, Dutch merchants, English ambassadors, Portuguese missionaries, French admirals, the exhibition contains no Japanese presence, not the shuinsen trade, not the Japanese communities at Hội An,

not the Franco-Japanese accords of 1940. The “past” ends just before the present it cannot acknowledge. This structural silence is the inverse of the 1942–43 Saigon catalogue’s five-page Nippon pavilion and maps a shifting politics of representation across a single year.

Institutional network as knowledge infrastructure: Boudet’s acknowledgments map the colonial knowledge apparatus. EFEO and Musée Louis Finot, Musée Blanchard de la Brosse, Musée Khai-Dinh, Société des Études Indochinoises, Amis du Vieux Hué, Amis du Vieux Hanoi, the courts of Bảo Đại, Norodom Sihanouk, and Sisavong Vong, plus private collectors including Etienne Denis, Lê Phát An, Truong Vinh Tong, and Hoàng Xuân Hãn. Bảo Đại and Phạm Quỳnh “bent the strict rules governing the custody of their archives”, framing Vietnamese access-restriction as an obstacle graciously overcome by Vietnamese collaboration. Hoàng Xuân Hãn contributes Tây Sơn-era materials without which the “Annamite expansion” narrative could not be constructed, yet epistemological authority remains with Boudet and the Directorate.

[Archives at National Archives Center I, Hanoi](#)

[EN] Creation of a Commercial Museum of Indochina in Yokohama

Ref: File no. 1267 | **Date:** 1925-03-23 / 1925-07

Correspondence from M. Méric de Bellefon, French Consul in Yokohama, to the Governor General of Indochina in Hanoi, on establishing a commercial museum for Franco-Indochinese economic relations. A second letter followed in July 1925, apparently without reply.

note: *Cross-reference with file no. 72513 (same subject, 1925).*

[EN] Requests for banners — “Japan in Wartime” photo exhibition, Hanoi

Ref: File no. 2603 | **Date:** 1942-12-06 / 1943-05-17 / 1944-10-06

Letters from Japanese Consul General N. Ogawa to Hanoi Mayor Guiriec (1942-12-06), requesting permission to hang banners on Rue Paul Bert and Boulevard François Garnier for cinema screenings and a photo exhibition marking the first anniversary of the Greater East Asia War. Mayor’s agreement: 1943-05-17. Second cycle (1944-10-06): banners for a photo exhibition organized by the Information Bureau of the Japanese Mission and the AFIMA Hanoi office, 14–19 October.

My question: *what was displayed, and how was the exhibition framed within the Vichy–Japanese co-presence context?*

[EN] Exhibition “Retour du Japon” — Indochinese painters, Hanoi Municipal Theatre

Ref: File no. 4714 | **Date:** 1943-11-16 to 1943-12-12

Exhibition request from the Société d’encouragement à l’art et à l’industrie for three Vietnamese painters returning from Japan: Nguyễn Nam Sơn (Nguyễn Văn Thọ dit Nam Sơn), Lương Xuân Nhị, and Nguyễn Văn Tý. Initially suspended (1943-11-22), then approved by the Governor General via Directeur du Service diplomatique Boisanger (1943-11-30). Opening: 11 December; exhibition ran 11–21 December 1943 at the Foyer du Théâtre Municipal. Joint patronage: S.E.M. Yokoyama (Institut culturel du Japon) and Albert Charton (Directeur de l’Instruction publique en Indochine). Flag protocol dispute: French flag to be placed at the center of posters (Chabas to Consul Taizo Watanabe, 1943-12-12).

My question: *Investigate the exhibition’s content as a Franco-Japanese cultural co-production. What does the flag dispute reveal about symbolic hierarchies?*

[EN] Nagoya Pan-Pacific Peace Exhibition (1937) — French Indochina’s participation

Ref: File no. 4723 | **Date:** 1936-03-31 (inquiry) / 1937-10-27 (thanks letter)

Inquiry (1936-03-31) on French Indochina’s participation in the Nagoya Pan-Pacific Peace Exhibition (15 March – 31 May 1937). Post-event letter from the Mayor of Nagoya (1937-10-27) thanked Hanoi for participating, noting it was the first international exhibition held in Japan, with over 4 million visitors.

Note: *Investigate what was displayed and French Indochina’s representational role.*

[EN] Special exhibition — colonial agricultural products, Musée de la France d’outre-mer

Ref: File no. 5352 | **Date:** 1936-10-30

The Musée de la France d’outre-mer organized a special exhibition of colonial agricultural produce.

[EN] Opening of the Musée Louis Finot — request for police personnel

Ref: File no. 5478 | **Date:** 1932-03-19

Letter from the EFEO Director to the Mayor of Hanoi, announcing the opening of the Musée Louis Finot on 20 March 1932, open Thu–Sun, 8:00–11:00 and 14:00–17:00. Requested four police officers from the municipal government to maintain order.

[EN] Organization of the International Colonial Exhibition in Indochina

Ref: File no. 70223 | **Date:** N/A

File addresses the importance of Indochina's participation in world expositions and the rationale for such representation.

[EN] Creation of a Commercial Museum of Indochina in Yokohama

Ref: File no. 72513 | **Date:** 1925

See also file no. 1267 (same subject).

[EN] Establishment of a museum of comparative anatomy

Ref: File no. 74018 | **Date:** 1939-06-01

[EN] EFEO exhibition of ancient, historical, and ethnographic art, Hanoi

Ref: File no. 839 | **Date:** 1929

File describes exhibition content including references to missionaries and their collaborators.

***Golden Gate International Exposition (San Francisco, 1939)**

[EN] Proposal to establish an Indochinese ethnological museum in Saigon

Ref: A. Bourrin report | **Date:** 1938-05-21

The Director of the Central Tourism Bureau proposed to the Minister of Economic Affairs the creation of an Indochinese ethnological museum, suggesting the 1939 San Francisco World's Fair as groundwork opportunity. Proposed location: Saigon, as the primary point of entry for foreign visitors and French settlers. The museum framed as a tourism driver, most visitors unaware of the region's ethnic diversity.

[EN] Reply on the ethnological museum proposal

Ref: Minister of Economic Affairs reply | **Date:** 1938-05-31

No suitable venue available; project to be deferred.

[EN] Distribution of Indochina promotional materials to Californian universities

Ref: Roger Gaucheron, French Consulate San Francisco | **Date:** 1938-04-07

Brochures, posters, and materials on Indochinese people, customs, arts, occupations, architecture, and civilization to be distributed to California universities. Stated aim: conveying Indochinese civilization to Californian youth.

[EN] Shipment of EFEO objects from Saigon to San Francisco for the 1939 exposition

Ref: A. Bourrin and Minister of Economic Affairs | **Date:** 1938-09-22

Report on objects supplied by the EFEO for the Golden Gate International Exposition (1939), transported from Saigon to San Francisco over two months.

[EN] Sending ethnological objects to the Musée d'art de l'Exposition internationale

Ref: George Cœdès | **Date:** 1938-06-13

Cœdès discussed sending objects of ethnological character to the international exposition's Musée d'art. References to Cambodia and possibly the Résident Supérieur du Cambodge/Tonkin.

***Foire-Exposition de Hanoï, 1941**

[EN] Hanoi Trade Fair — Pétain / Decoux — Pavillon des Sports, Grand Palais, Musée Maurice Long

Ref: VU-AN-NINH, 1941 | **Date:** 1941-11-30 to 1941-12-28

The Hanoi Trade Fair, established under Pétain, ran 30 November – 28 December 1941. Pages noted: Pétain and Jean Decoux; EFEO exhibition (L'Indochine dans le Passé); Grand Palais; Musée Maurice Long; Pavillon des Sports. Japanese presence documented in commercial sections: Japan's tourism, products, etc.

Note: *The split between the EFEO historical pavilion (Japan absent) and the commercial sections (Japan present) in relation to the triangulated knowledge production.*

Analytical notes — The Two Fairs in Hanoi and Saigon

The split within the 1941 Hanoi Fair: While Boudet's exhibition rigorously effaced Japan from the historical record, the commercial sections of the same fair documented Japan's tourism and products. The 1941 Hanoi Fair is therefore a split document, the cultural/historical register maintained French epistemological sovereignty by excluding Japan from the past, the commercial register simultaneously normalized Japanese economic co-presence in the present. Triangulated knowledge production was not evenly distributed even within a single event.

1941 → 1942–43: The 1942–43 Saigon catalogue is the moment that split becomes unsustainable. Japan moves from the commercial margin of 1941 to the representational center of 1943, five pages for the Nippon pavilion, more than any other section. The temporal strategy Boudet

deployed, keeping Japan outside the historical narrative, is no longer available when Japan is an explicit organizing presence at the fair itself.

The Yokohama commercial museum as missing third term: France proposed a permanent commercial museum on Japanese soil in 1925 and received no reply. Japan, by contrast, organized a photography competition and produced five pages of self-representation in Saigon by 1943. The circuit was built on Japanese terms. Boudet's 1941 Japan-erasure strategy reads accordingly not only as Vichy ideology but as a defensive attempt to reassert epistemological authority over the past precisely because authority over the economic present was already slipping.

The Nagoya thread: France proposes Yokohama museum (1925, no reply) → France participates in Nagoya Pan-Pacific Peace Exhibition (1937, 4 million visitors, Mayor's thanks) → Japan dominates Saigon Trade Fair catalogue (1942–43). The Nagoya fair is the pivot that established French Indochina's participation in Japanese-organized exhibition space and generated the inter-institutional goodwill that presumably facilitated the 1943 Saigon presence. Investigating what "French Indochina" looked like packaged for Japanese audiences in Nagoya would provide the closest analogue to the Yokohama museum that was never built.

"Retour du Japon" painters and the cultural circuit: Nguyễn Nam Sơn, Lương Xuân Nhị, and Nguyễn Văn Tý, Vietnamese painters trained in Japan, exhibiting in French colonial space under joint patronage of S.E.M. Yokoyama and Albert Charton, embody the triangulated circuit in their persons. The flag dispute (French flag at center of posters, Chabas to Watanabe, 1943-12-12) is the counterpart to the Saigon catalogue's five-page Nippon pavilion: one asserts French visual precedence the administration could no longer assert militarily or economically; the other documents how thoroughly Japanese self-representation had penetrated French colonial exhibition space.

Vietnamese agency: 1941 vs. 1942-1943: In 1941, Vietnamese figures (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, Phạm Quỳnh, Lê Phát An) appear as lenders and collaborators in Boudet's acknowledgments, materials contributed without interpretive authority. By 1942–43, Vietnamese writers (Huỳnh Tấn Phát, Hồ-Duy-Kiên) are authoring the texts. The degree of visible Vietnamese participation within the exhibition apparatus expanded between 1941 and 1943, though the structural condition of constrained agency remained. That expansion is itself worth explaining: intensifying Japanese co-presence may have given French administrators reasons to foreground Vietnamese collaboration as evidence of legitimacy precisely when French authority was most threatened.

***Establishment of Historical Museums in Indochina, 1943 (National Archive Center I)**

Fonds du Gouvernement général de l'Indochine | Hanoi, March 1943

This dossier comprises two related administrative documents from March 1943 exchanged between Governor General Jean Decoux and Finance Director J. Cousin. Together they record the decision to establish historical museums in Hanoi, Hué, Saigon, and Phnom Penh following the success of the Historical Retrospective at the 1942–43 Saigon Trade Fair, and the formal allocation of 4,000 piastres from the general budget to the Musée Louis Finot / EFEO for that purpose, while adhering to the principle of strict economy during the wartime. Decoux's 1943 directive to fund the Musée Louis Finot (later the Vietnam National Museum of History) through the general budget, with the EFEO listed as a copy recipient. The first document directly links the success of the 1942–43 Saigon Trade Fair Historical Retrospective to the creation of a permanent network of historical museums across Indochina, evidence that the trade fair served as an institutional incubator for the colonial museum apparatus.

In the second document, Cousin's reply confirms the 4,000-piastre allocation and explicitly identifies the budget channel: Chapter 80, Article 1, general budget, fiscal year 1943. The phrasing "the Musée Louis Finot, falling under the EFEO" directly names the institutional-financial entanglement between the colonial museum apparatus and the EFEO. Together with the first document, this dossier documents the administrative chain, from Decoux's political decision (triggered by the Saigon Trade Fair success) to formal budget inscription, that brought historical museums into the general colonial infrastructure.

Analytical note:

Why did Decoux want to establish a series of historical museum across Indochina? Establishing historical museums in 1943 was an act of colonial self-preservation at a moment when the political, military, and economic foundations of French authority in Indochina had already been structurally compromised. Japan had compelled the Franco-Japanese accords of 1940, secured basing rights, and maintained a de facto military co-presence throughout the colony. Decoux governed a nominally French territory that was in reality jointly occupied. In that context, cultural and historical institutions were the primary remaining domain in which France could assert unambiguous authority. Museums were one of the few fields where France could still act like an

empire when it could no longer fully be one.

This logic runs directly through the Decoux directive: the trigger is explicitly the success of the Historical Retrospective at the Saigon Trade Fair. What that success demonstrated, from Decoux's perspective, was that historical display worked, that it generated the kind of public legitimacy and cultural authority that military and economic means could no longer reliably produce. The decision to convert a temporary trade fair exhibition into a permanent museum network is therefore a decision to institutionalize a proven legitimization strategy.

Vichy ideology had a specific relationship to history and heritage that made museum-building in the colonies ideologically coherent rather than merely pragmatic. The *Révolution Nationale* under Pétain was explicitly anti-modernist in its cultural politics: it valorized *enracinement* (rootedness), regional tradition, artisanal heritage, and the continuity of the French national community against the perceived atomizing effects of the Third Republic's liberal modernism. This ideology had a colonial translation: just as France was to recover its identity through attachment to its deep historical roots, the French colonial project could be re-legitimized as the stewardship of Indochina's historical and cultural heritage against the disruptions of modernity, including, implicitly, Japanese-sponsored modernity.

The Vichy colonial museum was thus doubly ideological: it served *Révolution Nationale* values (heritage, rootedness, the moral authority of the past) and it served French colonial claims specifically. The historical museum said: we have been here long enough, and with sufficient seriousness, to have accumulated, organized, and preserved this region's past. This place's history is, in part, our achievement. That claim was simultaneously a Vichy claim (we are a civilization of stewardship, not exploitation) and an anti-Japanese claim (we, not Japan, are the legitimate custodians of Indochina's heritage).

Boudet's language in the *L'Indochine dans le Passé* catalogue, "a high lesson and an act of faith" is precisely this move. Vichy resort to the past as moral resource, redeployed as colonial legitimization in a territory under Japanese pressure.

- The Anti-Japanese Dimension

The historical museum network was, in this context, a French counter-move in the representational domain. Historical museums deal in depth of time, in the accumulated past, in the long civilizational presence, in a way that a trade fair pavilion structurally cannot. Japan could

display its products, its technology, and its seventeenth-century commercial connections to Annam; it could not easily claim the authority to narrate and preserve Indochina's pre-colonial past, its Cham towers, its Khmer stele, its dynastic maps. That was EFEO territory, and EFEO territory was French territory. Establishing permanent historical museums was a way of locking that authority into institutional stone before the political situation deteriorated further.

Notice too the geographic distribution Decoux mandated: Hanoi, Hué, Saigon, and Phnom Penh. This covers all four major centers of the Indochinese Union, a deliberate assertion that French historical and cultural authority extended uniformly across the entire colonial space, at precisely the moment when Japanese pressure was most acute in the northern regions (closer to China and the Japanese military's primary operations). The museum network mapped onto the territory of French administrative sovereignty and said: this is all ours, culturally and historically, in a way that cannot be displaced by military co-presence.

- The EFEO as Institutional Anchor: Knowledge Infrastructure and Political Authority

The routing of the Hanoi museum budget through the EFEO (as Cousin's reply makes explicit, "the Musée Louis Finot, falling under the École Française d'Extrême-Orient") is not incidental. The EFEO was the primary institution through which France had claimed scholarly authority over Indochina's past since 1900. Its legitimacy rested on decades of archaeological work, philological scholarship, monument conservation, and museum collection, precisely the kind of long institutional presence that is difficult to replicate quickly and that Japan, however powerful militarily, could not simply appropriate.

By channeling museum funding through the EFEO budget line, Decoux was not just using a convenient administrative mechanism. He was tethering the new political initiative (wartime historical museums) to the most robust source of French cultural authority in the colony. The EFEO's scholarly credibility would lend the new museums an intellectual legitimacy that a purely administrative directive could not produce. It is an entanglement of political legitimacy with scholarly authority, the colonial administration borrowing the EFEO's cultural capital to shore up its own diminishing political capital. The EFEO was not simply a research institution that happened to share space with colonial administrators. In 1943, it became the explicit financial and institutional vehicle through which Vichy France's cultural survival strategy in Indochina was implemented.

- Vietnamese Participation and the Legitimation Problem

The historical museum network was not only addressed to Japanese competition or metropolitan Vichy ideology, it was also addressed to Vietnamese audiences, and specifically to the Vietnamese educated class whose collaboration Decoux needed and whose loyalty Japan was actively courting.

The success of the Historical Retrospective at the Saigon Trade Fair, which triggered Decoux's directive, had been a success in part because of Vietnamese participation and authorship, figures like Huỳnh Tấn Phát writing within the exhibition frame, Vietnamese voices lending legitimacy to a French-organized event. A permanent historical museum in Hanoi, housed in the Musée Louis Finot with its accumulated EFEO collections, would offer Vietnamese intellectuals a similar platform, a space where Vietnamese history, artisanal heritage, and cultural identity could be displayed and, crucially, where Vietnamese scholars could possibly participate in the display. That participation would serve French legitimation purposes (demonstrating Franco-Vietnamese collaboration) while also providing a controlled channel for Vietnamese cultural-nationalist expression of the kind Huỳnh Tấn Phát had demonstrated was possible within the exhibition apparatus.

Phạm Quỳnh and Hoàng Xuân Hãn had contributed materials to Boudet's 1941 exhibition; the permanent museum network would institutionalize that kind of contribution into an ongoing, stable relationship between French curatorial authority and Vietnamese intellectual collaboration. For Decoux, this served the Vichy political goal of demonstrating that the Indochinese population supported French governance, particularly valuable as Japanese propaganda increasingly framed French colonialism as the enemy of Asian solidarity and Vietnamese cultural autonomy.