

“DISCOVERING” CAMBODIA: VIEWS OF ANGKOR IN FRENCH COLONIAL  
CAMBODIA (1863-1954)

A Dissertation

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“DISCOVERING” CAMBODIA: VIEWS OF ANGKOR IN FRENCH COLONIAL  
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This dissertation is an examination of descriptions, writings, and photographic and architectural reproductions of Angkor in Europe and the United States during Cambodia’s colonial period, which began in 1863 and lasted until 1953. Using the work of Mary Louise Pratt on colonial era narratives and Mieke Bal on the construction of narratives in museum exhibitions, this examination focuses on the narrative that came to represent Cambodia in Europe and the United States, and is conducted with an eye on what these works expose about their Western, and predominately French, producers.

Angkor captured the imagination of readers in France even before the colonial period in Cambodia had officially begun. The posthumously published journals of the naturalist Henri Mouhot brought to the minds of many visions of lost civilizations disintegrating in the jungle. This initial view of Angkor proved to be surprisingly resilient, surviving not only throughout the colonial period, but even to the present day. This dissertation seeks to follow the evolution of the conflation of Cambodia and Angkor in the French “narrative” of Cambodia, from the initial exposures, such as Mouhot’s writing, through the close of colonial period. In addition, this dissertation will examine the resilience of this vision of Cambodia in the continued production of this narrative, to the exclusion of the numerous changes that were taking place in the

country. Finally, I will be using French colonial archival sources in order to examine measures that were taken by the French colonial administration in order to take greater control over the area that constituted the Angkor Historical Park, and to implement preventative measures and physical alterations designed to keep the view of Angkor aligned with this narrative.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jennifer Lee Foley was born in Boston, and remained in Massachusetts until 1989, when she moved to New York City. She began a BFA in photography at the School of Visual Arts, and continued her studies in photography and film production, beginning in 1991, at Brooklyn College, the City University of New York. She spent one semester studying at Nanjing University in Nanjing, People's Republic of China, followed by one semester of study at Hanoi University in Hanoi, Vietnam. She continued to work and study in Hanoi for an additional eleven months beyond the completion of that semester, and upon returning to the United States changed her major course of study to Art History, with a concentration in Southeast Asian art. She received her Bachelor's of Arts degree from Brooklyn College in 1997. She began her graduate studies at Cornell University in Southeast Asian Art History the same year. In 2004 she moved to Washington, D.C., where she currently resides.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Lucia and William Foley, who have always supported my projects, ideas, studies, and travels; and to the memory of my friend Jenny Stewart, who brought so much joy to everyone who knew her.

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In the course of researching and writing this dissertation I have collected a long list of individuals and institutions to whom I owe my gratitude, particularly to all those who lent support—financial and intellectual support, as well as friendship—during the twelve months I spent in Vietnam, much of it in the central Vietnamese city of Đà Nẵng, the twelve months I spent in Cambodia, the three extended journeys to France, and over the course of writing in Ithaca and Washington, D.C.

I will begin with the institutional acknowledgements to those who have provided me with the funding that made this possible. I would like to acknowledge the support of the International Institute for Education, whose Fulbright Grant funded my research in Đà Nẵng. My department, the Department of the History of Art, supplemented that grant with a Goldring Fellowship, which was invaluable in carrying me over to the next funding period, and I appreciate their support. I was lucky to receive two summers of funding in the form of Einaudi Travel Grants, and would like to thank the Einaudi Center for this funding, and the Southeast Asia Program for its support of these applications. A portion of the time I spent in Cambodia, as well as time spent in France, particularly in 2002, was funded by the Sage Fellowship from Cornell, which I received through, again, my department, so another thank you to both of them. Nine months of my research in Cambodia was conducted through the financial support of a Luce Junior Fellowship, which was administered by the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap, Cambodia. My time there would have been impossible without it, and I owe CKS a debt of gratitude as a result. I would like, again, to thank my department for the funding and teaching opportunities it has provided for me throughout my time at Cornell, both before and after my field research. And finally, and by no means least, I would like, once again, to thank the

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Professor David K. Wyatt has always filled our conversations with a contagious enthusiasm, and reminds me, by example, that I began this process because I love learning. He, too, has always shown interest in my ideas, and has always supported my work, and deserves my thanks and admiration (and many cups of coffee at the Zeus Café) for all of that. Professor Eric Tagliocozzo, whom, due to the timing of his coming to Cornell and my departure for fieldwork, I have not had the opportunity to work with as much as I would have liked, has nevertheless been both enthusiastic and supportive, and I wish to extend my thanks to him for the time and attention that he dedicated towards reading and responding to drafts that I sent to him, even as he was in the midst of his own research in Southeast Asia. Because Professor Tagliocozzo was conducting research in Southeast Asia at the time of my “A” exam his place was taken, for that exam, by Professor Thak Chaloemtiarana. I am very grateful to Professor Chaloemtiarana for taking the time from his busy schedule to read and comment upon this dissertation, and to sit as a proxy for this exam.

The location where I conducted the bulk of my research in Cambodia was in the National Archives in Phnom Penh. The staff of the archives made this dissertation possible in more ways than one: in the years since the end of the rule of Democratic Kampuchea in Phnom Penh the staff of the archives has reorganized, refiled, and restored the world’s largest collection of colonial era documents on Cambodia, bringing it back from a pig sty (one of the building’s uses during the DK period) to a well-working archive. For this they deserve not just my thanks, but a celebration. The archives are a labor of love for Peter Arfanis, and he was always encouraging, enthusiastic, and helpful. Dari Y was always ready with a suggestion, a file, and her friendship, and Ming Rin’s system of keeping track of my requests made it possible

for me to bring what I'd found back to Ithaca. In addition to the National Archives, I was also able to use the library and the collection at the National Museum in Phnom Penh, and would like to acknowledge the following people at the Museum who made this possible: Lim Yi, Khun Samen, and Hab Touch. Finally, I would like to thank Olivier de Bernon of the Phnom Penh office of the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* for his suggestions on where to find further information.

Over the course of several visits to France, including time spent working in Paris, Aix-en-Provence, and Marseille, I conducted research at several libraries, museums, and archives, where I was assisted by a number of staff members. In particular I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Pierre Baptiste of the Musée Guimet in Paris; the Director, Franciscus Verellen, and library staff of the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* in Paris; and Laurent Logerot and Roland Cuenca of the *Archives Municipale de Marseille*.

The nature of this project changed numerous times in response to the research climate and the information I was able to gather. The most profound change was the shift in focus from the study of Cham imagery to colonial era Cambodia. Although the final result does not include the research that I conducted in Vietnam, I would like to acknowledge a number of people that assisted me in gathering information and researching various possibilities while I was there. I would like to begin with Trùng Văn Huấn, a young Cham man who went out of his way at every turn to help me gather information on Cham sculpture and to visit as many Cham temples as possible during my time in Vietnam. Huấn opened his home to me, set a place at the dinner table, introduced me to the men in his village who still taught children to read and write the Cham script, and took me on a borrowed motorcycle to hard-to-find temples. I owe many of the successes I had that year to Huấn, and he deserves and has my deep gratitude.

While in Đà Nẵng I was lucky to be able to continue studying Vietnamese through the University of Đà Nẵng with Thầy Châu of the Department of Linguistics. He was a patient teacher, and our lessons were a highpoint of my time in Đà Nẵng, and over the course of the year I not only gained language skills, but also a friend. In Đà Nẵng I spent many hours examining and photographing the Cham Museum's collection, where I worked with Cô Thủy Diễm, who was always helpful with my numerous inquiries. I would also like to thank Trần Ky Phương for his insight and assistance by email. Finally, I visited and photographed collections in a number of museums in Việt Nam, including the History Museum in Hồ Chí Minh City, where I was greatly assisted by Cô Đào.

Finally, I have a long list of friends and acquaintances in several countries who have offered a wide variety of support, from a couch to sleep on for a night, a week, or a couple of months, to ideas about how to resurrect my dissertation, and from helping me get a broken motorcycle repaired, to reading drafts of chapters at all stages. I would like to offer my gratitude to the following people for the assistance they provided in a variety of forms: Sokhieng Au, Adelaide Bayle, Thomas Bayle, Sarah Benson, Judy Bernstock, Maggie Bodemer, Tinto Campbell, Ed Carberry, David Chandler, Marina Chasse, Karen Chirik, Carole Dubois, Juliet Fiebel, Matt Foley, Adrienne Fricke, Seth Harter, Kate Jellema, Cindy Kleinmeyer, Nina Levinthal, Nancy Loncto, Ken MacLean, Kanika Mak, Karl Malone, Nguyen Vinh Tuyen, Dougald O'Reilly, Jennifer Paine, Teresa Palmer, Remi Pandelle, Mick Powell, Amanda Rath, Jason Rhody, Kay Rice, Rick Ruth, Myra Sabir, Mariko Saito, Tahli Shepard, Cheri Sigmund, Tyrone Siren, Sopeak Son, Sarah Spoonhower, Sarah Womack, Timothy Dylan Wood, and Eve Zucker.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AOM: *Archives d'Outre-Mer*, the archives of France's colonial territories, located in Aix-en-Provence.

EFEO: *École française d'Extrême-Orient*, the French School of the Far East, established in Sàigòn in 1899.

GGI: *Gouverneur Général d'Indochine*, the highest position in the colonial government of Indochina. The governor reported directed to the Minister of Colonies in Paris.

RSC: *Résident Supérieur du Cambodge*, the highest colonial position in Cambodia. The RSC reported to the GGI.

## PREFACE

This dissertation began as a very different project when I first proposed it in the fall of 1999. My original interests in Southeast Asia lay in the Cham towers of Mỹ Sơn, Phan Rang, Qui Nhon, and other locations along the central coast of Vietnam. It was the project that had brought me to graduate school in 1997, and was the topic that had drawn me to visit Vietnam in 1995, where I stayed for nearly fifteen months. My interest in Cham sculpture brought me back to Vietnam for an additional year in 2000 and 2001. I had planned to conduct a second, shorter period of research in Cambodia in order to gather material for a comparative study of Cham and Khmer sculpture. Ultimately I would spend a year in Cambodia, and the focus of my work would shift from Champa to colonial Angkor. In the process of attempting to complete this dissertation, my original research project would become untenable, and from this disaster and its ruins would spring the locus of this project: the colonial life of *Les Ruins d'Angkor*.

The original proposal for my dissertation was to compare dance imagery in Cham and Khmer sculpture from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. I had become interested in the work of Alessandra Iyer, whose book *Prambanan: Sculpture and Dance in Ancient Java*<sup>1</sup> investigates the dance images found on the walls of the temples of Prambanan in Java. She proposes to view this temple as a static, three-dimensional visualization of the *natya sastra*. I was captivated by the layered offerings contained in images of dancers, whose sponsorship was an offering; whose movements were offerings; and whose carved image became yet another offering. I was also excited by the idea of reconstructing and re-animating the path taken by the *sastras* from India to

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<sup>1</sup> Alessandra Iyer, *Prambanan: Sculpture and Dance in Ancient Java, A Study in Dance Iconography* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1997).

Champa and Cambodia, as Iyer attempts to do for Java.

The process of imagining a dissertation from Ithaca does not always breed success on the ground in Southeast Asia. After two months in Hanoi, solidifying the Vietnamese language skills I had acquired at Cornell, I moved to the central Vietnamese city of Đà Nẵng, which was the base of my research for the next twelve months. The archaeological site at Mỹ Sơn was eighty kilometers away, Qui Nhon and Phan Rang could be reached easily by train, and the Cham museum—a colonial era open air museum—was located near the foot of the new bridge across the Han River that connected Đà Nẵng to the road leading to Hội An.

The following year was a mixture of successes and failures. Among the successes were visits to the Cham temples that stand atop numerous hills along the coast from Đà Nẵng to Phan Thiết. Over the course of many trips, some of them repeat journeys, to Phan Rang, Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, Phan Thiết, and throughout Quang Nam province, I visited all but two of the known Cham towers in Vietnam. I was able to observe and photograph Cham pieces in the collection at the National Museum of Art in Hanoi, the History Museum in Hanoi, the History Museum in Hồ Chí Minh City (where I was allowed to view and photograph the pieces in storage), the Antiquities Museum in Hue, the provincial archaeological depot in Quang Nam, and the city museums of Qui Nhon and Nha Trang. After meeting with the director of the Cham Museum in Đà Nẵng I was allowed to photograph the collection on display in the museum. I spent nearly every day at the museum for more than three months, observing and photographing pieces of the collection.

The failures were often frustrating, at times farcical, and sometimes profound. Missed trains and misunderstood instructions, poisonous cactuses and spiders, and the occasional motorcycle mishap were some of the lesser disasters. I was “invited” to visit the immigration office when it was discovered that my sponsor had failed to

notify the authorities of my arrival. The professor I was supposed to work with failed to appear to several appointments I had made with him in order to be introduced to the director of the Cham museum. The museum director refused to meet with me unless the professor accompanied me. A friend who knew the director interceded on my behalf, and many months into my time in Đà Nẵng I was finally granted a meeting with the director. When we met he gave me permission to photograph the collections, but said he would have to think about whether or not I could see the pieces in storage. I made a seemingly endless stream of appointments with the director to discuss the pieces in storage; he never attended a single meeting with me again.

The contents of the storage had become important to me when I had been told by another researcher that he had once seen the storage under the previous director's tenure and that it had contained several sculptures of dancers. I was unable to confirm his memory as I was never able to see the Đà Nẵng storage. But the need to gather more images to work with had become progressively more important over the course of my research in Vietnam. I didn't feel as though I had enough examples of dancers to conduct the in-depth study I had planned to do. The museums and temples around the country all had sculpted dancers. However, I felt they appeared disparate rather than coherent, and had become concerned that it would not be possible to bring together the materials at hand for the study I'd intended. As I photographed images in the museum I tried to find something that I might be able to use to string these images together.

Many of the sculptures in these collections were of unclear provenance. A couple of pieces in Hanoi were probably scaled copies of some of the more famous pieces in Đà Nẵng. Many did not explain where they had been found beyond the name of the province. Furthermore, there was widespread discussion among researchers of Cham art and history of the disappearance of numerous pieces over the years, from the

French colonial period, through the American war period, to the difficult post-war years and beyond. Cham pieces occasionally came up for auction or for sale in galleries in Geneva, Paris, and New York. These pieces are often purchased by private collectors, and they disappear from public sight. I tried to imagine a way of finding more about the provenance of the sculptures that were in the Đà Nẵng museum collection. Knowing more about the pieces might help to construct a framework for discussing the materials that I had. I asked the woman at the museum whom the director had assigned as my liaison if I could take a look at the museum acquisition records.

She told me there were none. I thought that perhaps she did not want to show recent files on the pieces since the museum had been under the direction of the Vietnamese government. I clarified by telling her I was hoping to see the colonial records for the museum, which were more likely to contain the information I was hoping to find, such as where and when the pieces had been found and brought to the museum. The museum didn't have any records like that, she said. She then suggested that they had been destroyed during the wars, or perhaps by the French when they left.

I began to ask other researchers I had met in Vietnam if they knew anything about where these records might be. Two suggested that I might try the National Archives in Hà Nội. Another suggested the archives in Hồ Chí Minh City. None of the researchers I asked remembered coming across files for the Đà Nẵng museum, but there were thousands of files in each archive, which left the possibility open that they might still be there. However, I was told at the archive in Hồ Chí Minh City that my sponsoring institution was not an acceptable sponsor for research in the archive. They suggested that I stay another year with a different sponsor. An official at the archive did discuss the collections with me before I left. When I explained the topic I was interested in she informed me that there were no files for Annam in the Hồ Chí Minh

City collection. They were all either in France or destroyed, she said.<sup>2</sup>

This conversation occurred in the final month of my time in Vietnam, and as I prepared to move on to Cambodia for the second part of my research I wasn't entirely sure what I would be researching. After a year of work in Đà Nẵng I didn't feel that I had found a coherent body of objects to make a comparison possible. My attempts to find the history of the objects I had found hadn't amounted to much. I discussed the disintegration of my proposed dissertation topic with friends, colleagues, and advisors, and contemplated the numerous suggestions that were proffered.

I began my research in Phnom Penh at the museum. At the suggestion of one of my advisors I decided I would attempt to find the history—the biography—of a single object, or a small group of objects. At the museum I was told that I might be able to find this information in the archaeological reports, which covered half of a wall of book shelves in the museum's library. These bound reports provided interesting reading between the scale drawings and descriptions of the techniques used to repair and shore up crumbling structures. Unfortunately these reports were without photographs, and without the attribution of acquisition numbers in these texts to the objects that had been found it was extremely difficult to connect description to object with assurance.

In the fall of 2001 I visited France, where I planned to search the colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence for information on the National Museum in Phnom Penh, hoping that I might find the trail of an object to follow. When I arrived in Aix I visited

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<sup>2</sup> During the colonial period Vietnam was divided into three administrative units, Tonkin in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochinchine in the south. The archives in Ho Chi Minh City contain the Cochinchine files. Although many files from the former French colonies were sent to France, particularly in the years after the close of the French colonial empire, the Cochinchine files were not among these. However, very few of the Annam files appear to have been sent to France, as this collection at the Archives d'Outre-Mer are limited in scope. A fellow researcher has subsequently informed me that she was given more than a dozen files labeled Annam while researching in the Ho Chi Minh archives, which contained statistics and other information from that protectorate. When she asked for more like those files she was told there were no more, and when she asked to take them out again she was told she could not see them.

the *Archives d'Outre-Mer* (AOM), and found a sign affixed to the closed gate informing me that the archives were closed due to an archivists' strike. I decided to wait, hoping that the strike would end.<sup>3</sup> After five weeks in Aix the archives still had not reopened. I pushed back the date of my return and spent the following four weeks in Paris where I combed through the collection of materials on Cambodian sculpture and archaeology at the *Bibliothèque National de François Mitterand*. The AOM reopened two days before my scheduled departure date. When I asked the receptionist at the archive if the strike was over he said, today, yes. Tomorrow, perhaps. Next week, less likely. As it appeared that the possibility of a continued strike was strong I returned to Cambodia.

Upon my arrival in Cambodia I visited the National Archives in Phnom Penh where I began to read through the colonial era files that the archive staff had patiently and meticulously catalogued, organized, repaired and re-filed over many years. Prior to departing for Cambodia I had read that the archives, along with the national library and the library of the Buddhist Institute, had been destroyed during the Democratic Kampuchea regime. The complete demise of these institutions was exaggerated to varying degrees, although all three sustained significant damage both during the DK regime, and in the years that followed.<sup>4</sup> During the DK regime the archive's files were thrown into piles in corners and along the floor. Files were mixed together, pages were separated from files, the papers grew mold and sustained water damage, and many were damaged by insects. The building was used as a pig sty during at least part of the years between April 1975 and December 1978. As a result there are places and spaces

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<sup>3</sup> During this time I conducted research in the municipal archives in Marseille on the paired statues at the foot of the Grand Staircase leading to the city's Gare St. Charles. This research was the basis of an article entitled..., which is under review with the (French historians).

<sup>4</sup> Several Cambodian friends who lived through the DK and post-DK years in Cambodia described the lack of bags for food and other products bought from the market during the 1980s. They all reported a lack of any materials to carry meats, fish, and other hard to handle objects, which were then wrapped in paper ripped from books that sellers kept handy. Each of them reported suspecting that the books had been taken from the library.

where the written record is somewhat incomplete.

As I read through the colonial files at the National Archives, I continued to visit the National Museum and to read through the archaeological reports written by the Conservators of Angkor. I still had not been able to find anything which indicated a clear history of a single object: sometimes I would find a description of a statue in a report, or a letter in the archives written by a colonial official in the provinces describing a statue found by a farmer and turned into his office. Some had two or three documents connected to them, others only one. Many indicated that the object had been sent to the museum in Phnom Penh or to the Conservation d'Angkor. However, as I read through the files and the reports I became progressively more interested in what they were saying about the temples at Angkor, about the presentation of the temples and its sculptures to French residents and travelers, and about the objects that were being sent to Paris and Marseille to display at the colonial expositions. While I continued to search for the elusive trail of a specific object, another topic began to come together, formed out of the information that was accessible in the files, reports, and books I was reading in Cambodia. After several months of fruitless searching for an object biography I began to concentrate on the picture of the colonial past that appeared in these documents, and that became the object of my research throughout the remaining time I spent in Cambodia. I attempted to pull in as many resources as possible in Cambodia, and visited both the office of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) in Phnom Penh, as well as the office of the *Conservation d'Angkor* in Siem Reap. The Phnom Penh EFEO archive was no longer in existence; the Conservation had lost its records during the DK regime. Both suggested I might be able to find copies of some documents in France.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I believe that some of the documents that the Conservation lost during the DK regime were the monthly or semi-monthly reports written by the Conservators of Angkor. The official I spoke with at the Conservation appeared to believe that the only copies of these reports existent were in France, however, there are bound copies of many of these reports in the library of the museum in Phnom Penh.

In the final months of research I returned to France, where I hoped to fill in gaps in the materials I had collected in Phnom Penh with those from the Paris EFEO office and the AOM. When I arrived at the archive at Aix, I discovered that the collection of documents from the *Résident Supérieur du Cambodge* (RSC) was very limited on the topic of Angkor. Most of the documents remained in Cambodia. I returned to Paris where I spent a number of weeks working through the archives of the EFEO. These archives were filled with the letters of EFEO members, conservators, scholars and directors. This material complemented the documents that I had collected from the National Archives in Phnom Penh. It provided some of the correspondence that went on between the EFEO office in Paris and the office in Phnom Penh, whose records had been “completely destroyed”<sup>6</sup> during the DK regime. I also visited the Musée Guimet several times in order to view their collection. In a final effort to attempt to trace the history of a single object I asked about the photographic and written records of the museum. I was allowed to look through the collection of photographs taken on expeditions, but was not allowed to copy the images and was not able to access to the written reports on the pieces in the museum’s collection other than accession numbers.

When I returned to Ithaca after nearly thirty months of research I arrived with five boxes of photocopied documents from various archives. I would be piecing these fragments together over the following two years in an attempt to reconstruct a ruin from disaster. In the Paris EFEO archive I had read through the descriptions of *École* officials who crated and boxed the Hà Nội EFEO archive and library in 1954, and then pulled strings to get space allocated on aircraft and boats leaving from the port of Hàiphòng for their records. Some of these files, research materials, books, manuscripts, maps and drawings made it to Paris. Some made it to Saïgòn; some to

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<sup>6</sup> Olivier de Bernon, Director of the Phnom Penh EFEO office, personal communication.

Phnom Penh. In later years some of the materials that had made it to Saigòn were moved to Phnom Penh for safe-keeping during the war. The EFEO office and its archives were ransacked by the Khmer Rouge. I thought of my own journey as similar to that of the EFEO's archives: I had traveled back and forth between Hà Nội, Đà Nẵng, Hồ Chí Minh City, Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Paris, Marseille, and Aix-en-Provence, picking up fragments in each place. These fragments would become the foundation of my dissertation.

Finally, I have a note on the spelling of place names used in this dissertation. Readers will notice an apparent anachronism in my use of place names and transliteration. Khmer does not have a standardized transliteration scheme for rendering the language into Roman script. As a result many place names have two, three, and sometimes more spellings, depending on who is doing the transliteration. Many of the temple names and major cities and towns today have generally accepted spellings across different languages, however, reading a French text or consulting a French map from the colonial period will produce spellings such as “Angkor Vat” and “Pnom Penh.” For words and place names that required transliteration I have used the more modern and more widely used spellings rather than the older French spellings.

Throughout this dissertation readers will also encounter place names which are no longer in use. Chief among these names are: Indochina (or Indochine); Tonkin; Annam; Cochinchina; and Siam. When discussing these locations within the context of the colonial period I have retained the names which were then current, and which were used by the writers, scholars, photographers, and journalists whose work is being examined in this dissertation. French Indochina encompasses the area that is today the countries of Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina were the names given to the three main administrative units of Vietnam during the French colonial period. Tonkin is today northern Vietnam, Annam is now central Vietnam,

while Cochinchina was the southern part of the country. Tonkin and Annam, like Cambodia and Laos, were administered as protectorates, while Cochinchina was a colony. Thailand was called Siam until the country officially changed its name in 1939.