

French Freemasonry

Indochina 1868-1975 I/II

The story of **French Freemasonry in Indochina** begins with **Napoléon III** embarking on the conquest of the Annam (Viet nam) in 1858. **Chasseloup-Laubat**, his marine minister, a Freemason, vigorously supported the colonial expansion and France first took control of the south of the country, la **Cochinchine**, before taking over **Cambodia**. By 1867, the conquest was complete and **Indochina** was 'pacified'. When the French arrived in **Saïgon**, it was merely a provincial capital in the middle of the southern marsh located at the base of the *Mékong Delta*. By 1865 there were five hundred French compared with fifty thousand indigenous people making up the population of the city. A **Commission Municipale** was created in 1867 and it was against this background that in 1868, **Le Réveil de l'Orient** was founded with *Michel Amber*, another official of the marine ministry, as a Worshipful Master. The lodge rapidly expanded from thirty seven members in 1870 to approximately ninety by the turn of the century. It counted numerous civil servants who were mostly *ex-pats* from the Administration Colonial among its members. *Foulhoux*, one of the Worshipful Masters, 'urbanised' **Saïgon** by constructing a Governor's House, Law Courts, a Custom House and a Post Office. If we study the lodge's officers between 1868 and 1897 we see one third originating from the military, one third from the 'old' colonies with the remainder consisting of settlers. Three brothers stand out for their involvement in the organization of the new territory: **Jules Blancsubé**, **Paul Dislère** and **Auguste Pavie**. **Blancsubé** was the personality responsible for instituting the civilian administration by the creation of the **Conseil Colonial** and the abolishment of military rule. **Paul Dislère** was the instigator of the colonial ministry thereby creating a voice for settlers in the colonies. **Auguste Pavie** pushed the boundaries exploring **Cambodia** and **Laos**. It's not hard to imagine the difficulties of being of regular mason in those circumstances; assiduity is hard to achieve. Between 1871 and 1879 France recovered from the conflict with Prussia and conferred a protectorate status on the Indochinese peninsula. In that context, **La Fra-**



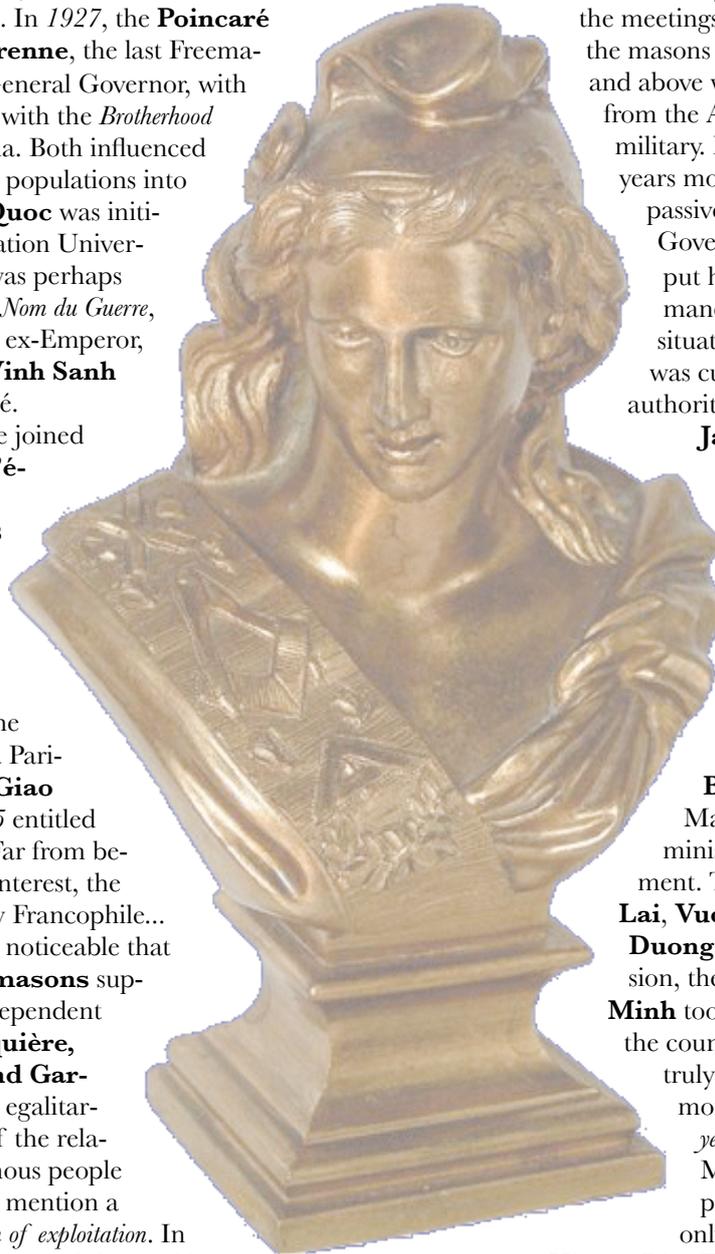
ternité Tonkinoise was created in Hanoi under the authority of **Jean-Marie de Lanessan**. There was some tension between the **Grand Orient** in Paris and this lodge. **Jean-Claude Colfavru**, Grand Master of the Grand Orient at the time, was against what he called the 'Indochinese adventure'. **La Fraternité Tonkinoise** wrote to the *mère patrie* about the richness of the country and the 'ease' with which it had been pacified. The lodge was also heavily involved with figureheads from the press and publishing companies, promoting numerous young Vietnamese talents. This was the beginning of an opening for the indigenous People. **Hanoi** was indirectly enjoying the Masonic *effervescence* by very quickly becoming the most modern city in Vietnam and **Jean-Marie de Lanessan** was even made Governor, albeit for a short period. In 1897, **Paul Doumer**, a member of the Grand Orient and future president*, was in charge of the French dependency. He prepared the final civilian structure and chose **Hanoi** as capital. For nearly twenty years, almost all high ranking civil servants were Freemasons. During that period, a stream of new lodges opened: four from the Grand Orient and two from the Grand Lodge de France. Cambodia had to wait until 1906 for its first lodge to open, **L'Avenir Khmer** in Phnom Penh. In 1907, **Gustave Serres**, Worshipful Master of **La Libre Pensée d'Annam** passed a premonitory remark: 'we should be aware of the quickly developing indigenous population'. **La Ruche d'Orient** was founded in 1908 and amongst its bye-laws was included advice to pursue: 'the studies of philosophical and social questions in the far-east and the studies of the Asian secret societies, their origins and interrelations'. Curiously, the French lodges opened their doors more easily to 'Annamites'. Freemasonry was in fact what they consider as one of the projected 'pillars' of **Republican Ideas**.

* Paul Doumer (1857-1932) was the President of France from June 13, 1931 until his assassination. On May 6, 1932, he was shot in Paris at the opening of a book fair by Paul Gorguloff, a mentally unstable Russian émigré.

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The Freemasons were concerned about the influence of the missionaries; the 1905 separation of the **Church and State** was far less strict than in the 'métropole'. **Courcelle-Seneuil** put forward the idea of a knowledge for all or independence. The first world war saw a slowdown in Freemasonry but 1919 brought a progressive return to normality. The **Spirit of Geneva** was celebrated, nationalism condemned and patriotism supported. In 1927, the **Poincaré** government replaced **Varenne**, the last Freemason to hold the post, as General Governor, with **Pasquier** a sympathizer with the *Brotherhood* and an expert on Indochina. Both influenced the reception of the local populations into the lodges. **Nguyen Ai Quoc** was initiated in 1922 at La Fédération Universelle, albeit in Paris. He was perhaps better known by his later *Nom du Guerre*, **Hô Chi Minh**. Even the ex-Emperor, deposed by the French, **Vinh Sanh** joined in 1927 at L'Amitié. Wherever the Vietnamese joined the order, all were from **P'élite Francophone**. In a system with limited rights for the locals, **Freemasonry** seems to have been the only place in which the indigenous people were treated as the equals of the coloniser. A member of a Parisian lodge, **Duong Van Giao** published a thesis in 1925 entitled 'Indochina 1914-1918'. Far from being of limited academic interest, the publication was resolutely Francophile... and anti-colonialist. It's also noticeable that numerous **French Freemasons** supported the idea of an independent peninsula including **Blaquière, Monet, Wintrebert, and Garros**. They all adopted an egalitarian aspect in their view of the relations between the indigenous people and the colonisers, not to mention a relatively mild *denunciation of exploitation*. In 1930, in Indochina as in most of the world, an economic crisis began, and social unrest ensued. Some masons were directly involved in the repressive backlash, but, most denounced the abuses perpetrated on the locals. Two masons: **Constant Metter** and **Marcel Ner** sent a letter to the *League of Human Rights* against a fellow mason **Maurice Weil** who was directly involved in the excessive condemnation of 121 syndicalist and communist militants. Right



up until the beginning of the Second World War, Freemasonry oscillated between **benevolence** and **repression** as a reflection in microcosm of French public opinion. In the summer of 1940, following the **French** defeat, **Japan** invaded the north of Vietnam conquering the south in 1941. **Vichy** tried to keep some semblance of sovereignty. The *Brotherhood* was strictly forbidden by law and the meetings went underground. All the masons of the grade of **Master** and above were systematically evicted from the Administration and the military. During the next three years most masons entered into a passive resistance. In 1944, the Governor General, **Decoux**, put himself under the command of **de Gaulle**. The situation in the far away colony was curious: the **French** authority collaborated with the **Japanese** with complete obedience to **de Gaulle** at war with the Empire since 1941. On the 9th of March 1945, the Japanese liquidated the French force. **Vietnam, Cambodia** and **Laos** are *de facto* independent states. In Vietnam, the Emperor **Bao Daï** called on some Masons to assist in the administration of his government. These included **Tran Van Lai, Vuong Quang Nhuong** and **Duong Van Giao**. In this confusion, the *Viet Minh* of **Ho Chi Minh** took control of the north of the country. The **Vietman War** truly commences in these last months of 1945. The next *ten years* saw the agony of the *Masonic* presence in the peninsula. In 1955, the only two remaining lodges: **Khong Phu Tseu** and **Le Réveil de l'Orient**, tried, with little success, to fight the soon-to-be **Diem** dictatorship in southern **Vietnam**. By 1975, most of **South East Asia** had fallen under *communism* and with that fall came the end of Freemasonry. The remaining survivors returned to *France* with very little hope in mind...

Bibliography: **Francs-maçons d'Indochine**, Jacques Dalloz, Éditions Maçonique de France, 2002

* Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) translates to 'He Who Enlightens'. He was Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1945 to 1955 and President from 1946 to 1969.