The ambiguous mission of the Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO)
- an academic institution in a colonial environment

Pierre-Yves Manguin

Abstract

The foundation of the EFEO in Saigon in 1900 followed by a decade the final “pacification” of French Indochina. From that foundation onwards, the EFEO’s history was intricately entwined with the complex, stormy and more often than not tragic 20th century history of the region. Inevitably, it grew up Indochinese. The School was funded by, and its administration functioned within the Gouvernement général de l’Indochine until the 1950s. The EFEO, however, benefitted as a matter of principle from academic independence, under the patronage of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, with an agenda that extended to other regions of Asia that were not under French colonial rule. In practice, it’s undertakings at times dovetailed with the colonial government agenda, as in the conservation field — particularly in Angkor —, or in the Cambodian religious domain — where its scholars were prescribers of Buddhist dogma. To add to the ambiguity of the EFEO mission in Asia, EFEO scholars promoted historical representations of Indochinese and Southeast Asian societies that were both employed by local nationalist scholars to forge national identities and rejected or amended to promote indigenous agency.

The EFEO in Cambodia (left: Louis Finot and Victor Goloubew with the Buddhist monks Nath and Tath in 1920; right: a colonial representative with King Sihanouk in Angkor 1941
Biographical information

Professor Pierre-Yves Manguin is a member of the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO, French School of Asian Studies), and teaches at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, Paris). His research focuses on early history and archaeology of the coastal states and trade networks of Southeast Asia. Starting in the early 1980s, he has lead archaeological work in Indonesia (in South Sumatra and West Java) and in the Mekong delta in Southern Vietnam, mainly on harbor-city sites situated along the main trade routes of Asia. He has published on themes related to the early trade and state formation process in Southeast Asia, and on the archaeology of the early states of Srivijaya (South Sumatra), of Funan (Mekong delta), and more recently of Tarumanagara (West Java). He has also published on the history of the EFEO and on the historiography of South Sumatra.

Selected publications


