



## Rats and sewers in 'modern' and 'civilized' French Hanoi

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Reviewed title

The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt: Empire, Disease, and Modernity in French Colonial Vietnam

Michael G. Vann and Liz Clarke

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press  
ISBN 9780190602697

### Structure and composition

The book consists of five parts. The first one, by the historian Michael Vann and the artist Liz Clarke, is a so-called graphic history: a historical treatise in a visual form consisting of cartoons with supporting texts. It centres on the presentation of the bubonic plague epidemic in French colonial Hanoi in 1902–03, and the French attempts – ‘darkly humorous’ attempts as the jacket promises – to fight urban rats. This part of 122 pages forms almost half the book and is its hard core. The following four parts form to a large extent supporting arguments to present history in a visual form. The second part consists of a large number of primary and secondary documents that pertain to different episodes of the French endeavour to govern the Vietnamese and fight the plague. Many of these documents have been translated from the French. Vann wrote subsequently in the third part a useful essay of the various needed contexts in order to understand why the French came at all, what they did in Indo-China, and why things went wrong now and then. This part finalizes with remarks on the character of the bubonic plague epidemic (a pandemic one rather). It originated in the 1850s in South China and reached the Southeast Chinese coast and South Asia by the end of the 19th century and struck Hanoi in 1902. The French became notably nervous as the rats that carried the fleas whose bites would transmit plague germs, settled (also) in the recently built sewers meant to keep the French quarter dry and clean.

Of the two short final parts, one is devoted to the history of the book. Vann gives an account of its origins and its later collaboration with Clarke, on the process of making this book. By accident, the rats came to the fore, as Vann writes about his archival research on the French colonial history in the French city of Aix-en-Provence: “When flipping through the decades-old card catalogue for material on municipal regulations, I came across a card for a dossier on ‘Destruction of Hazardous Animals’. Thinking that it would be amusing, I ordered the file. When it came, I was stunned to discover the contents. There were dozens of dates, signed, and stamped forms informing the colonial administration of the capture and killing of thousands of rats” (p.237). Vann decided subsequently to give attention to this ‘micro-history’ as he called it, within the macro perspectives of the French colonial history. The rat killings were originally written down

in a minor part of Vann’s dissertation, but became subsequently an episode in Hanoi on its own, and now even in the form of cartoons. The final section leads the reader to what the book is actually supposed to be; as Margaret Bodemer writes in her review on the back-cover: “a practical text for world history courses”. This final part ends then in style, with ‘Discussion Questions’ and ‘Essay Topics’, and reads like some sort of examination of the content of the preceding pages.

### Visuals and words

The book is not a history of colonial Hanoi. It deals however in some detail with the contexts leading to the French endeavour to colonize Indo-China and to transform the Vietnamese citadel and market settlement into “a little Paris in the East ... in which the French could feel comfortable”, as the context rectangles in the cartoons tell (p.12).<sup>1</sup> Vann and Clarke show in several pages the villas of the French, their impressive public buildings and infrastructural works, built during the 1880s and 1890s, to arrive at this comfortable feeling. These construction activities served as well to demonstrate the ‘civilizing mission’ that the French undertook in Hanoi. Vann and Clarke use this concept of the civilizing mission as a common thread throughout the texts and pictures of the cartoon chapter. It reached its peak with the desire among the French to have a system of sewers in the French quarter like the Parisians had been given, and which was an ultimate symbol of urban modernity and the mission to civilize.

But, then come the rats in Vann’s and Clarke’s graphic story! A bit sneaky first, a bit down-under at a lower graphic, but more and more and on many pages cliff-hanging in what is presented as an evolving historical thriller. Indeed, in 1902 they were detected in the new sewers of the city, and they were “most plentiful in the French quarter” (p.81). Text and graphics suggest subsequently rats strolling in Hanoi’s fine sewers, where “the pipes offered rats a new ecological niche, free of predators and full of food” (p.77).<sup>2</sup> Matters became worse when in 1902 a first case of bubonic plague was detected – not in the quarters inhabited by the native Vietnamese population, as the French supposed. A French citizen – representing the growing legion of French men and women settling in Hanoi, strolling along its boulevards and sitting on the sidewalk cafes with glasses of wine – says to another (per balloon): “well, what do you expect, the native quarter is filthy”, but receives the reply: “*au contraire* my friend, the

first death was on Rue Paul Bert ... in the heart of the white quarter!”, followed by a graphic of a near heart-attack of one of them and a laughing Vietnamese ‘boy’ (p.83). Modernity has created a potential health-crisis, comment Vann and Clarke and the colonial administration flung into action, demonstrating: “France’s civilizing mission in action!” (p.87).

A first strategy to fight rats was to ask the French physician Alexandre Yersin to come to Hanoi. A few years before he had co-developed<sup>3</sup> a serum against the fleabites carried by rats, and in 1902 he advocated successfully the mass killing of rats. The authorities offered a bounty for every dead rat, and later on for every rat-tail when the pile of rats waiting to be incinerated became too high,<sup>4</sup> but found subsequently profitable rat-farms around Hanoi. This is presented by the authors as Vann explaining on a blackboard to his students: “the French bounty and the Vietnamese reaction illustrate the economic principle of a ‘perverse incentive’” (p.95). Subsequently, however, when the plague epidemic in Hanoi had faded away in the same year, Yersin’s serum proved to be a preventatively effective anti-toxin protecting those who had been in contact with a plague victim.

### Modernity and rats

The stage for the thriller has been set and visualized: modernization and French civilizing colonial power versus fleas, rats, and the plague. The hero has been announced as well: Yersin, though he was reluctantly and distrustfully received in Hanoi with his message of fleas and an anti-serum. Yet, what actually happened to the French in Hanoi was less dramatic after all. Three Europeans died in the whole of Indo-China during the years 1898 and 1908 during which the plague struck intermittently various parts of the colony. Vann and Clarke do not give figures for Hanoi but admit that it affected primarily the Vietnamese and Chinese quarters, which were by the way not provided with sewers that the rats found so convenient. And, let me look at Bombay where the fierce plague-epidemic of 1896 and subsequent years killed thousands of Indians every week, even though sewers were also a far cry in those parts of the city that were most affected. Indeed, the epidemic in Bombay has often been related to exactly the opposite: the absence of an adequate drainage system.

The whole contradiction that Vann and Clarke create so beautifully by rats

seeking a comfortable urban life and hence threaten urban elites striving for modernity and civilization is then a bit overdone, to say the least. Has it been designed for the purpose of a visually thrilling story, full of rats – as said hanging on cliffs – and turning pages? The book, hence shows the danger of offering a catchy episode in visuals and allow – paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan – the medium to become the message. If one ignores, however, the visual drama, and looks at the overall attempt to present in various ways the French colonial adventure in Hanoi, the book may make students curious and read more.

### Postscript

The Vietnamese were quick in removing the symbols of French colonial rule after their independence. Statues of French heroes were torn down, their street names, etc., replaced by Vietnamese ones; at least more than a hundred. One street name still has French roots. The Institute of Epidemiology ‘Louis Pasteur’ can be found on nr. 1 Pho Yersin (the street named after the medical doctor who put the authorities on the right track to fight the plague). The Vietnamese have not forgotten his contribution to ‘modernity’ amidst all the *folie de grandeur*.

Hans Schenk, Independent researcher,  
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### Notes

- 1 I use the word rectangle to make a distinction between these background texts and balloons, which show spoken words: in a red balloon-frame those from Vietnamese words and in a blue one those from the French.
- 2 It is tempting to compare the happy rats in the sewers with the *flâneurs* along the Paris boulevards and subsequently those among the boulevards and cafes of the colonial district of Hanoi, which appear frequently in the book of Vann and Clarke. Even a reminder of Yves Montand’s famous song: “*j’aime flâner sur les grands boulevards*”, etc., is hard to avoid.
- 3 A competing claim for the identification of an effective serum against plague was developed by the Japanese physician Kitasato Shibasaburo.
- 4 The administrative processing of all these rats and tails triggered actually Vann to explore this episode in the French colonial history (see above).