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H-France Review Vol. 24 (January 2024), No. 3

William L. Gibson, *Alfred Raquez and the French Experience of the Far East, 1898-1906*. London and New York: Routledge, 2021. \$170.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0367702489; \$52.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0367702465; \$47.65 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-1003145226.

Review by David W. Del Testa, Bucknell University.

Reading William Gibson's *Alfred Raquez and the French Experience of the Far East, 1898-1906* resembles opening the door from a quiet corridor onto a busy hallway. Gibson suddenly drops his reader into the peripatetic life of French traveler and *bon vivant* Alfred Raquez and in doing so, ties practically every activity in which Raquez involves himself to the larger historical trends and tendencies of fin-de-siècle France, including a hunger for the so-called exotic and a desire to wander. From the moment he arrives in Asia, it seems that Raquez is everywhere, with everyone. While Gibson's approach creates a fast-paced book of holistic vision, and the book encourages careful reflection on the informal exchanges of knowledge and interpersonal networks that underwrote fin-de-siècle empires, historians may find the lack of reference to secondary sources somewhat jarring. Readers also learn--eventually--that Raquez was a complete fraud.

In 165 short pages and nine chapters, Gibson introduces us to Alfred Raquez, the pseudonym of lawyer Joseph Gervais (1864–1907), who traveled to French Indochina in 1895 to escape the aftermath of bankruptcy and presumably reinvent himself. Gibson draws extensively from the periodic literature--newspapers in particular--of the fin-de-siècle and early twentieth century from metropolitan France and colonial Indochina, some archival records, several narrative histories of the past and today, and a few critical scholarly texts. For eight years, Raquez primarily traveled across the broad expanses of what is now Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, sometimes to places few French people had visited, and reported on them vividly and critically. In his refashioning of himself, Raquez/Gervais discovers a real talent for writing and ethnography, something his previous life may have suppressed. At its base, *Alfred Raquez and the French Experience of the Far East* is a biography of the last decade of Raquez's life.

Gliding up to the quay in Batavia (modern Jakarta) in 1898, the reader begins in chapter one an arm-in-arm tour of Asia with Raquez. After encountering the demeaning petty insults of Dutch colonial occupation, Raquez embarks for Saigon, where he by chance encounters and receives the sponsorship of colonial Indochina's new governor-general, Paul Doumer. This allows Raquez to travel to Phnom Penh and visit the court of King Norodom I, on which Raquez wrote considerably, especially Norodom's intimate, medicated escapades. Interestingly, Raquez attends the first screening of a film in Indochina, an interesting juxtaposition of an ancient court with a modern technology. Then, in chapter two, Raquez speeds off to the French concession in

Shanghai, where he spent two years and published to broad acclaim a work popular at the time and reprinted in 2017 by NIAS Press—*In the Land of Pagodas (Au Pays des Pagodes)*—a kind of insider’s travelogue originally published in serialized form that is filled with a mixture of keen observation, rhapsodies of the exotic, and subtle critique of the colonial condition in China. [1] This book confirmed Raquez’s transformation into a well-regarded observer of the East, and confirmed his status as a newly popular writer. He also traveled into China’s interior and became a kind of amateur ethnographer, meeting with ethnic minorities and recording their voices and photographing them, a series of approaches to his encounters with new peoples that he brought subsequently to full realization in Laos.

His fame spreading, in chapter three the reader learns that a French official has invited Raquez to Laos in early 1900, where the French had recently imposed a first protectorate in 1893 and would impose a second in 1907. The official believed that Raquez could advertise in his writing this new, comparatively unknown space to outsiders. Raquez did not shirk from the offer, which was his first of several visits to Laos. Here, he celebrated the beauty of native women, marveled at old temples, and again, observed with a critical eye the architecture of empire in ways that did not please everyone. As he had done in Shanghai, Raquez collected his notes and published them in what became another popular publication, *Laotian Pages (Pages Laotiennes)*, reprinted in 2019 by NIAS Press. [2]

Demand for Raquez increased, and he became trusted by the administration of colonial Indochina. In chapter four, we see him start working in late 1901 as a journalist in Hanoi, writing articles on a wide range of topics and published widely. The new governor-general, Paul Beau, had Raquez appointed in 1902 as editor of the newspaper *La Revue Indo-Chinoise*, a post that Raquez retained for several years and a publication that Raquez transformed into something like a magazine into which he invited colonial officials to submit reports. Thereafter, Gibson continues in chapter five with Raquez’s never-ending travels in this time period: southern China, Thailand, and back to Cambodia for the inauguration of the new King, Sisowath.

The latter half of Gibson’s book consists of three substantive, focused chapters, and a short reflective conclusion. Chapter six concerns Raquez’s 1904 expedition to Laos. Longer and less focused than chapter six, chapter seven concerns Raquez’s participation in the 1906 Colonial Exposition at Marseille, as director of Indochina’s Laotian Exhibit, including a long presentation of the mystery surrounding his death there; his life before he became Raquez; and, the subsequent deaths of those with whom he associated as he reinvented himself. Unlike the previous chapters, these chapters do not jerk the reader back and forth between the past and the present, between topic and derivative, and they read much more pleasantly as a result. The 1904 Laotian expedition is the pinnacle of Raquez’s journalistic and ethnographic approach. On this expedition deep into the Laotian hinterland, he not only takes copious notes and records the sounds of the people he meets, but he photographs cultural activities, natural vistas, and the progress of the expedition itself in prodigious quantity in ways useful to posterity. These photos are collected in Diethard Ande’s 2015 *Lao Postcards by Alfred Raquez: A Collection of His 166 Postcards from 1906*. [3] They are an invaluable record of peoples and cultures overwhelmed subsequently by war and modernization. The 1906 Colonial Exposition in Marseille also allowed Raquez to introduce Laos to a wider public, including a significant collection of cultural artefacts, animals, and people the Government-general of Indochina allowed him to bring for display.

In chapter eight, Gibson explores Raquez in death. He died of smallpox shortly after the conclusion of the 1906 exposition. Here, Gibson examines the larger story of the transformation of Gervais into Raquez, and the silence that accompanied his death despite his broad fame and acclaim. The discovery—some hint of which the reader might have wanted at the start of the text—of Raquez abandoning his family in Lille and stealing a church cash box and participating in a Ponzi scheme, stained his reputation despite his accomplishments. His former friends in Indochina may have been too ashamed to memorialize someone suddenly surrounded by scandal. Raquez quickly fell into obscurity until a revival of interest in all things colonial in the 1980s and 1990s created new interest in him and his work.

To his great credit, Gibson has rescued, in several journal articles, reproductions of Raquez's writings, and this book, the life and times of an adventurer who very much captures the *zeitgeist* of the time in colonial Indochina and France. In this way, Raquez resembles other, perhaps more orientalist adventurers such as Georges Groslier or Jean Ajalbert. Raquez is everywhere and with everyone, intensively but briefly, until his death, but survives in his writings and images, which are still appreciated down to the present day. Despite its enrapturing detail, a reader could use some more sense of Raquez's life before his flight to the Far East from France at the beginning of the book as well as some critical distance on Raquez, for we learn extensively of who he was—global *flâneur*, an *exote*, a born-again *boulevardier*—but not necessarily how Gibson interprets the meaning of his adventures.

#### Notes

[1] Alfred Raquez, William Gibson, and Paul Bruthiaux, *In the Land of the Pagodas: A Classic Account of Travel in Hong Kong, Macao, Shanghai, Hubei, Hunan and Guizhou* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017).

[2] Alfred Raquez, William Gibson, and Paul Bruthiaux, *Laotian Pages: A Classic Account of Travel in Upper, Middle and Lower Laos* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2019).

[3] Alfred Raquez, Diethard Ande, Philippe Drillien, and Joachim K. Bautze, *Lao Postcards by Alfred Raquez: A Collection of His 166 Postcards from 1906* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2015).

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ISSN 1553-9172