Nomadic Technicians and Migration in the Francophone World

Daniel M. Ringrose
Minot State University

In the decades before 1914 hundreds of skilled, working-class, French citizens left France to seek employment throughout the empire. Armed with diverse technical skills and a wealth of experience drawn from public and private construction in metropolitan France and elsewhere, hundreds of Frenchmen converged on Indochina in the early twentieth century to seek opportunity and to build an optimistic vision of imperial France in Asia.

The imperial technician has a rich history, for technological skill provided one measure by which Europeans exploited colonial resources and judged other cultures, yet the broad participation in empire-building of civil engineers, surveyors, technical clerks, mining experts, foremen, and other technicians has remained largely the province of scholars studying high-profile projects such as the Suez and Panama Canals.¹ This essay offers some first steps toward a project that considers French technical experts as actors whose lives and career trajectories carried

them through the rich, interconnected world of the Francophone empire. As such, it draws on recent efforts to contemplate historical narratives that integrate the experiences of the colonial and the metropolitan as complimentary aspects of a larger Francophone society.\textsuperscript{2} Just as Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler signal the current historical "ignorance about the workings of the colonial state," so too do we know remarkably little about the middle-level workers who implemented the technologies of that state.\textsuperscript{3} As a contribution to a richer understanding of metropolitan France embedded in and connected to its colonial empire, this case study of public sector workers employed in Vietnam between 1903 and 1914 reveals how migration of technical workers contributed to a changing French imperial landscape of labor relations. It seeks to puncture a classic stereotype of the colonialist as a young, single fortune seeker, replacing it with an understanding of skilled workers as family men who pursued international careers throughout the Empire, often with a final contract in Indochina.

The origins and training of these workers speak to changing economic opportunities in their departments of origin, to the ways skilled workers acquired their education, and to the regional "sending" patterns that prevailed after 1900 in France. The changing composition of the colonial

\textsuperscript{2} Scholars have recently articulated the need to reconceptualize the place of colonial studies in French history in a number of venues, most notably in a special issue of \textit{French Historical Studies}: Alice L. Conklin and Julia Clancy-Smith, "Introduction: Writing French Colonial Histories," \textit{French Historical Studies} 27(2004): 497-505.

\textsuperscript{3} Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, "Between Metropole and Colony," in \textit{Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World}, eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 21.
workforce in early twentieth-century Indochina reveals how heavy reliance on French technical "capital" came to shape colonial labor policies and created an uneasy transition to an indigenous work force. The coming of the First World War exacerbated a shortage of skilled labor in colonial Indochina, but in fact the crisis occurred earlier, in part because of the migratory nature of the European pool of technical labor. Finally, the changing labor climate between 1903 and 1910 forced a dramatic reconceptualization of the place and capacity of indigenous workers in pre-war colonial society. As French workers moved on, usually to return to metropolitan France, their replacement came to dominate discussions of colonialism and citizenship in the 1920s and 1930s.

In the pages that follow I draw on two very different bodies of evidence to study how migration patterns, technological skill, and identity intersected in colonial Indochina. The first part of this essay explores a set of administrative reports that detail the work histories and personal circumstances of 416 technical workers employed in Annam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina by the Indochina Bureau of Public Works in 1903, 1911, and 1912. The study of technicians offers a particular challenge in that these records present good information about origins, demographic data, and work histories, but rather isolated instances of qualitative material to reveal motivations. Nonetheless, records from public works employees in France at the beginning of the twentieth century yield a rich portrait of who went to Indochina and their previous employment patterns and some surprising information about family and marriage patterns. Subsequent sections of this article draw on colonial policy documents and reports from lobbyists and industrialists to show how changing labor demographics came to shape colonial labor policy,
citizenship, and training of indigenous subjects in the years before and after the First World War.  

**Skill and the Francophone World of Work**  
In the later nineteenth century, civil engineers, city planners, doctors, and politicians regularly invoked technology as an essential part of their vision of a modern French nation. Senior engineers from the Corps des Ponts et Chaussées (Bridges and Roads) adopted a rhetoric regarding provincial France that openly discussed metropolitan hinterlands as regions that engineers might colonize, improve, and, in the broadest sense, reshape through the application of technology. While it is striking to see the rhetoric of colonial conquest applied to the provincial countryside, it should also be noted that many of the less elite personnel who accomplished this task were drawn directly from the provinces. Within France, therefore, elite engineers accomplished regional modernization unevenly but nearly always by recruiting locally trained technical agents, foremen, surveyors, draftsmen, mechanics, technical clerks, and clerical staff.

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4 Centre des archives d'outre mer, Aix-en-Provence [hereafter CAOM] GGI Indo 77136. These dossiers were collected in two series: 371 cases from 1903 and 49 cases from 1911 and 1912. Subsequent references are to cohorts from 1903 and a combined 1911-1912 cohort. Cases within this sample are represented by a unique identifying number.

These workers provided the collective technical capital for the Second Empire's ambitious plans to expand French infrastructure, from bookkeeping to leveling, surveying, and, at the highest levels, project design.

Within France, these skilled workers were recruited regionally and required to pass exams in basic mathematics and practical construction knowledge. Through the 1860s and early 1870s state engineers appear to have had little difficulty recruiting, but by the 1880s a serious shortage of skilled laborers and qualified foremen emerged. This shortage led the director of the Ponts et Chaussées to appeal to engineers nationally for suggestions on how to recruit and retain lower-level technical personnel in quantities sufficient to complete the many government construction projects underway in the metropolitan France. A shortage of skilled engineers manifested itself at the highest ranks of the French civil service, particularly within the Ministry of Public Works, as engineers were drawn to temporary overseas projects, exemplified first by the Suez Canal and then by service in Panama, in increasingly large numbers by the 1870s. By the 1880s a steady stream of engineers was granted leave to offer expertise and to extend the state's influence to private firms and other government ministries. Some destinations, such as Algeria, were shunned by engineers as "hardship" or "punishment" posts, but others, including Indochina, appear as commonly requested destinations.

As France's technical elite sought foreign work in larger numbers, so too did the vast numbers of support personnel who had built French railroads, tramways, ports, factories, and urban amenities during the growth years of the Second Empire. By 1900, shortages of skilled technical capital

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6 CAOM FM 316 Circulaire n.22, 1878.
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appeared within France as the needs of the colonial and metropolitan services increasingly overlapped, leading both sectors to compete for the same pool of labor. These three observations—that technical experts conceptualized their work in the French provinces as colonization, that state officials worried openly about a shortage of skilled technical capital within France at the end of the century, and that France’s technical elite sought out colonial service—frame a larger project that seeks to study the lives and migratory experiences of skilled workers as they moved through the empire. To explore these connections, this essay begins with the deceptively simple question of who actually went to Indochina.

Who Built New France in Indochina?

General treatments of imperialism and certainly most textbooks describe colonists, some who were supervisors and others who were technically skilled employees, as young, single, fortune seekers. Depictions of the colonies in the popular press and at the Paris Exposition implied that imperial service offered a taste of the exotic as well as a career ladder for engineers and technicians seeking quick advancement at a time when few opportunities presented themselves in the metropole. The veracity of this stereotype can be questioned, but in the closing decades of the nineteenth century it is certain that Frenchmen signed up for colonial service in significant numbers, and by 1913 perhaps as many as 23,700 colonists resided in greater Indochina.7

Despite this important presence, relatively little detailed research explains the origins or work patterns of most of these colonists. By contrast, lively studies of explorers such as Auguste Pavie, research on miscegenation, and studies of colonial urbanism have done much to further our understanding of the cultural processes and effects of the European presence on gender, race, and power in the colonial world. To this agenda can also be added detailed treatment of the origins, motivations, and work patterns of the skilled Frenchmen charged with realizing France's colonial vision of a "New France." Although there are a few general studies of the lived experience of Europeans in Indochina's provinces, the search for technical experts who migrated from France to Indochina suggests that we know relatively little about the people who set out to construct "New France" and even less about the experience they had previously acquired in other parts of the Empire.


Nomadic Migration Through the Francophone World

The majority of colonists in this study were born in France, although a small number were born overseas and migrated to Indochina from colonial territories, Algeria, or even from within Cochinchina. The 337 people working in 1903 whose origins are known hailed from nearly every department. Even more strikingly, the departments are relatively evenly represented. The Parisian basin provided the birthplace of the largest number of workers with forty cases, but other regions with major ports, such as Marseille or Bordeaux, were not similarly represented. Oddly, Corsica ranked high, boasting seventeen technicians, but in general, most departments could claim between two to nine representatives in the Indochinese public works sector in 1903.\footnote{CAOM 1903 Cohort, summary of geographic origins.} In part the geographic diversity of this sample can be attributed to the nature of state construction in France in the later nineteenth century. As state projects trained and recruited personnel regionally, so too did they produce a nation-wide supply of technicians who could seek work in the colonies, particularly as the depression slowed domestic projects in the 1880s.

These workers brought with them a wide set of skills honed on railway construction within France or with the Corps des Ponts et Chaussées' many road, canal, and urban infrastructure projects. Nearly all had completed basic military service, and many of the youngest workers entered public works service upon completion of a tour with the French navy, which at times discharged sailors in Indochina. Older workers shared a complex pedigree that blended many years' experience of public and private work in France with extensive work on major projects throughout the Empire.

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One typical worker spent his early years working for the Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée Company building railways in France, moved to Marseille to direct a chemical company, and then worked as a contractor and surveyor for tramway construction around Marseille before embarking for Indochina. Another completed military service, spent 1879-1882 building railways in Algeria, and then returned to France to work as a surveyor in Cantal before his departure for Indochina. A third case profiles a mining technician who left France to work in mines in North Africa, moved on to Mozambique, Spain, Italy, and then Switzerland before his final arrival in Haiphong. One particularly hardy technician worked from 1879-1885 in France, passed a decade in Panama, two years in the Congo, and three years in Paris before departing for Indochina.11

Upon arrival, the group employed in 1903 worked in positions that closely mirrored their previous experience in France. As the following table details, the majority of these workers built railways or worked in urban construction or road and waterborne navigation, all areas that saw significantly reduced funding in France at the close of the century.

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11 CAOM 1903 Cohort, #221 Bontoux, #222 Boissel, #213 Caggini, #230 Bénard.
Table 1:

Numbers of Skilled Technical Workers
Employed by Sector in 1903

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Railway Construction</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Railway Operations</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ports and Navigation</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary Service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(architecture)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(general)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(roads &amp; public buildings)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a group, these agents stand out for the diversity of countries visited prior to arrival in Indochina and for a tendency to stay no more than four or five years in any one place. The collective multi-national experience of the 1903 cohort boasted service in Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Argentina, Panama, Congo, Algeria, Madagascar, Pondicherry, China, and New Caledonia. In nearly all cases these skilled workers stayed only a few years in each locale before moving on.

The most immediate appeal of colonial work at the turn of the century was that it paid extremely well. A foreman (conducteur) with only two years' experience in the Ponts et Chaussées in France could arrive in Hanoi and expect a salary of upwards of 10,200 francs, a sum that exceeded even the base pay of much higher ranking engineers with Polytechnique credentials in France. In addition, after 1873 a ministerial decree ensured that colonial public service employees received a special supplement as well as

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12 CAOM GGI Indo 7131.
a stipend for living expenses. The years following the continental depression of the 1880s and the scaling back of civil construction in metropolitan France under the Freycinet plan added to the appeal of colonial service. Reductions in rail and canal projects led many to seek work elsewhere, as did the collapse of Ferdinand de Lesseps' ambitious, but financially corrupt, Panama Canal project. The backgrounds of the men in this study reveal a complex and evolving international labor landscape and suggest that historians might profitably reconceptualize the skilled labor market in Francophone, if not global, terms.

Marriage and Assimilation

Once in Indochina, technical workers pursued lives that extended beyond their projects and formal duties. They led complicated lives, married, had children, and sampled local culture. Demographic data make it easy, perhaps, to lose sight of the human dimensions of the Frenchmen who went to Indochina. While this is an area in which research with memoirs, novels, and similar sources may eventually prove fruitful, even administrative and personnel records reveal intriguing patterns related to age, marriage, and children. Marital status provides the first surprise, for the 1903 workers were almost exactly evenly divided. As chart 1 indicates, single, divorced, and widowed workers constituted slightly over one half of the labor pool, while married employees made up the remainder of the sample.

\[13\] CAOM FM Gen 316 2066.
\[14\] CAOM 1903 Cohort, summary of marital status.

Proceedings of the Western Society for French History
The social lives of single men presented a systematic challenge to colonial authorities. Single Frenchmen kept mistresses, fathered children with indigenous women, or even, as a few records tantalizingly suggest, sought out marriage partners within the Vietnamese community. Authorities had long sought to discourage such practices, probably fruitlessly, as suggested in a confidential 1897 memo titled "Circular related to the inconveniences produced by the cohabitation of public servants with indigenous women." The author warned of the "disastrous consequences" of cohabitation in government housing and noted "we have, unfortunately in our Corps examples too recent and painful for our superiors to forget them." Despite these warnings, about ten percent of the single Frenchmen in this sample sought official recognition for the children they fathered. They used a variety of descriptive phrases to indicate mixed parentage, including "recognized children by an indigenous woman" or

15 CAOM GGI Indo 7770, Confidential Circular, 18 Sept. 1897: "Circulaire relative aux inconvénients résultant de la cohabitation des fonctionnaires avec des femmes indigènes."
"children born of an Annamite woman—recognized." While authorities frowned on mixed unions, it appears that most single fathers carefully sought official recognition of their offspring to protect the children's future claims to French citizenship.

The tension inherent in colonial policy and actual practice among singles, divorcees, or widowers is not especially surprising and validates in part the notion that colonial service in an exotic locale offered individuals a chance to seek fortunes and marriage partners, or simply to start anew. Married workers reveal a slightly different story, for most had married before arriving in Indochina. In addition, in many cases the children of married men in the 1903 group were born before the family moved to Indochina. This suggests that at least in demographic terms many of these technicians' families were well established prior to overseas service in Asia. While the background information for individual cases in this sample is not definitive, the career trajectories pursued by these workers suggest a rich Francophone labor market in which a worker could hop from place to place, family in tow, as economic opportunities presented themselves. Nomadic technicians, it seems, were comfortable relocating around the Empire, fathering children with partners who might or might not be

16 CAOM 1903 Cohort #375 Speck; #255 Mohamer-bey-Himan.
French, and expanding their families, as long as the colonial locale offered schooling and other civic amenities.

**Age and Crisis in the Supply of Technical Labor**

A demographic profile reveals that skilled positions in colonial service in 1903, far from being a young man's enterprise, attracted a considerable number of middle-aged men.

**Table 2: Age and Marital Status in 1903**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth decade and age in 1903</th>
<th>1840-49</th>
<th>1850-59</th>
<th>1860-69</th>
<th>1870-79</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>72-63</td>
<td>62-53</td>
<td>52-43</td>
<td>42-33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1%)</td>
<td>(12%)</td>
<td>(81%)</td>
<td>(6%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3%)</td>
<td>(19%)</td>
<td>(78%)</td>
<td>(0%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most were over forty years of age, and nearly half were family men who migrated from job site to job site with their spouses and children as opportunities appeared. It took time to acquire the skills required for Public Works service, so it is not too surprising that the foremen, draftsmen, and clerks who brought skills, international expertise, and their families to Southeast Asia were, as a group, middle aged in 1903. They had led complicated lives, and in the decade following 1903 they would begin to contemplate retirement and, eventually, return to France. Ministerial reforms in 1878 had accelerated this trend by lowering the mandatory age of retirement to sixty-one from sixty-five, depending on rank, in hopes of opening opportunities for promotion in metropolitan France.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) CAOM FM GEN 316 circulaire n. 22, 1878, signed C. de Freycinet.
Indochina the effect would be devastating in the decade before 1914, for it encouraged retirements at a time when very few new Frenchmen were arriving in the colony.

Older members of the 1903 cohort were fatigued and ready for retirement, as reviewers often commented: "M. Bellieud is very fatigued and worn out by a stay of seven continuous years in the colony." Another reviewer blamed age and climate: "this agent has been affected by a poor assignment, from a climatic point of view, and having caught 'the fever' and suffered poor health for six months has not been able to give his assignment the necessary activity." Collectively, the factors of age, illness, fatigue, and retirement produced a shortage of skilled technical labor in the decade before 1914. Coupled with colonial practices and attitudes regarding the education of indigenous Vietnamese to perform these tasks, this shortage created a double legacy that would shape the post-war labor shortage in Indochina.

The Indigenous Dynamic:
Paradoxes of Assimilation and Practice

In the early years of the twentieth century the Ministry of Public Works placed a low priority on training indigenous workers to assist or replace skilled Europeans in railway construction, public engineering, or urban improvements. The Public Works School for Native Students (Ecole Indigène des Travaux Publics), founded in 1902, and the Secretarial School, founded in 1903, were intended to train draftsmen, surveyors, technical workers, office clerks, scribes, and clerical workers. These enterprises were regarded as inadequate, for they focused primarily on courses to be completed after hours at the end of

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20 CAOM 1903 Cohort, #233 Belliud, #416 Leverdier.
of the workday. As evidence of a skilled labor shortage mounted though, colonial officials felt pressure make this training more rigorous. Belatedly, the Public Works School undertook modest reforms in 1912 and 1913 to respond to critiques of its ineffectual training and the high cost of the school's operations. Acknowledging the school's weaknesses, the Director of the Political and Indigenous Affairs Service insisted on "reorganization of the Public Works School on a more serious basis . . . to train a group of technical agents who could effectively replace supervisors, clerks, and even to a certain degree the foremen of the European cadre of Public Works employees."21

For the first time, public officials initiated formal and serious discussion of the eventual replacement of a diminishing pool of European technicians. The reforms that followed acknowledged the need to train technical agents capable of replacing their European counterparts, and shortly before the war small numbers of graduates began to enter the work force. By 1916 the graduates were sufficiently numerous to merit formation of a social club for indigenous technical workers, students, and graduates of the Public Works School of Indochina.22

Despite the better training that accompanied this shift in policy, colonial officials remained extremely reluctant to allow indigenous workers to replace their French counterparts. As small numbers of indigenous technicians entered the work force, the complicated role of naturalized citizens in government posts limited their participation in public service. In the years between 1898 and 1912 a small

21 CAOM GGI Indo 43682 "Note pour M. le Directeur du Cabinet et du Personnel," 5 March 1913.
22 CAOM GGI Indo 43688 Pièces Divers 1913-1916, approval letter dated 1916.
number of workers applied for and received status as "naturalized" French citizens, only to discover that the Governor of Indochina and the Minister of Colonies required naturalized Vietnamese to resign their positions if they were mayors, notables, or canton directors. In effect, colonial officials banned naturalized Vietnamese from elected offices or representative positions, stating, "If our control of the populations of Cochinchina is to be exercised effectively and in accordance with our sovereign rights it is not possible for indigenous public functions to be occupied by naturalized Annamites."\(^\text{23}\) Aspects of this interpretation were felt within the Ministry of Public Works, too. Paradoxically, even while the state's official training schools might invest an indigenous worker with the technical skill to work alongside or perhaps even one day to replace a Frenchman, it was reluctant to invest in him the authority to supervise his non-naturalized counterparts.\(^\text{24}\)

Concern with the preservation of authority prevailed among many Frenchmen, a pattern evident in the yearly reviews of French workers. Supervisors systematically praised and stressed the need for authority, leading one to note, "M. Dègenet lacks activity, but he exercises strong authority with his indigenous personnel."\(^\text{25}\) Given this attitude, it is difficult to imagine a widespread transfer of authority to naturalized Vietnamese workers, and indeed, in 1903 only two of the 367 public works employees in the 1903 cohort fit this description. This ambivalent, pre-war

\(^{23}\) CAOM GGI Indo 5808 "Effets de la naturalisation pour les fonctionnaires indigènes," Letter and Reply 1898.

\(^{24}\) The Dutch experience reveals some important parallels, as Elsbeth Locher-Scholten explains in "So Close and Yet So Far: The Ambivalence of Dutch Colonial Rhetoric on Javanese Servants in Indonesia, 1900-1942," in *Domesticating the Empire*, 131-53, 142-45.

\(^{25}\) CAOM 1903 Cohort #355 Dègenet.
logic came full circle in the years after 1918 when the Indochina section of the powerful industrial and colonial lobby, the French Colonial Union, met to plan post-war reconstruction. A lengthy discussion blamed the scarcity of technical personnel on "mobilization which deprived Indochina of its young French population and forced older elements to stay in the colony longer than prudence dictated. Now, worn out by too long a stay in Indochina, these public servants and colonists need to return to the metropole, even though it [France], which has had to bear the difficult burden of the war, is not capable of replacing them."

Not a single member present suggested indigenous labor as part of the solution, preferring instead to call on the government to recruit the necessary technical personnel in France as quickly as possible.

Where, then, has this excursion from metropolitan France to Indochina taken us? First, the French colonists in Vietnam in 1903 constituted a diverse group whose composition stimulates a rethinking of the conventional wisdom about colonial migrants. Public sector workers brought with them considerable experience and skill; they were middle aged when they arrived in the colony, and distance and the hardships of foreign service did not prevent their spouses and children from accompanying them. This remarkably mobile group could be labeled expatriates, but they do not seem to have abandoned France in any permanent fashion. Over one-third spent their careers as itinerant, nomadic technical workers chasing projects around the empire, and nearly all had worked in France as well as at least one other overseas locale. Given the varied trajectories of their prior careers, it is difficult to imagine the cohort of 1903 staying longer than five or six

26 CAOM FP 100 APOM 353, 15 Nov. 1918, 1ère séance, 9.

years in Vietnam, and it is even less likely that they would come to view Indochina as a permanent home. Rather, pressure to reform the schools dedicated to training indigenous workers and the aging demographic of the European cohort strongly suggest that the European labor force began draining out of the colony before 1914. Lack of local integration may also be a function of the types of projects to which French workers were assigned, and it may prove useful to research whether projects such as railroads, bridges, and urban infrastructure drew workers into contact with populations at the village and local levels or if they in fact encouraged a more isolationist, "base camp" mentality. In terms of popular colonial rhetoric, this group of technicians might build a "new" France in Indochina, but they were not going to inhabit it for the long term.

Government policies related to skilled labor, ethnic and national identity, and citizenship converged in ambiguous and contradictory ways in early twentieth-century Indochina. In the face of a growing need for technical labor, due in part to the opportunistic and cyclical departure of French workers, colonial authorities resisted serious training and recruitment of indigenous personnel until 1912 at the earliest. It might be instructive to learn whether French workers themselves viewed Vietnamese technicians as collaborators or as threats to their livelihood. At the same time, French supervisors remained profoundly skeptical that the moral authority of naturalized Vietnamese workers might equal that of their French counterparts. After the war this attitude prevailed in Indochina as well as in France, where policy makers, governors, and industrial lobbyists agreed that the only solution to Indochina's labor needs was to import more skilled Frenchmen. While it is unlikely that this decision was exclusively based on concerns over the loyalty or authority of indigenous
workers, it rested on a pre-war logic that set the stage for colonial conflict and industrial exploitation that would ultimately become repressive and irreconcilable.

Finally, the experience in Indochina highlights a broader phenomenon of nomadic technical migration, a pattern most familiar to the twenty-first-century observer of multinational corporations that deploy workers to construct railways, build oil refineries in remote locations, or reconstruct devastated nations. The technicians who fetched up in Indochina in 1903 represented a nomadic corps of technicians-for-hire; they were skilled French laborers who moved fluidly from metropole to colonial and foreign outposts on nearly every continent.27

Historians have long thought of technology as essential to empire, but the tendency to study ambitious overseas projects, such as the Panama canal, in isolation and without much attention to the workers themselves misses the surprising degree to which France's technical experts migrated throughout the metropole and its imperial territories. Above all, the experiences of skilled workers in pre-war Indochina suggest that further study of migration and mobility might produce a broader understanding of the evolution of French identity among skilled workers. In what ways, for example, did prior experience in other territories pattern migrant workers' attitudes and interactions with local populations? At very least, this human dimension should make scholars rethink how profoundly the Francophone world was interconnected at the turn of the century and how these connections might offer a different perspective on the imperial experience.