

THE PIONEER OF VIETNAMESE TECHNOLOGY:

HENRI OGER (1885-1936 ?)¹

By

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Henri-Joseph Oger was born in Montrevault (Maine-et-Loire), October 31, 1885. He passed his teaching Baccalauréat Degree (Latin, Greek, Philosophy) “without distinction” in 1905. He then enrolled in the École Pratique des Hautes Études (IVth section) and was listed in the 1906 directory as a degree candidate and a student of Louis Finot. At his own request, he completed two years of military service in Hanoi (1908 – 1909) and then enrolled in the “École Coloniale” (1909) graduating fourth of twenty-five students.

He was appointed a student - administrator of the Indo China Civil Service, December 29, 1910 and promoted to “Administrator, 5th class,” July 1, 1912. On June 3, 1914 he returned to France. It was said of him that he was well trained, even erudite, and an extremely hard worker. He was certified in the Annamite language and Chinese characters.

Drafted after the declaration of war, he was discharged after one year on June 17, 1915. Then, despite numerous interventions from parliamentarians and his own wish to remain in France, Oger was made to return to Vietnam. He was subsequently repatriated on June 18, 1919 because of sickness caused by the overwhelming workload of his double life as researcher and administrator, which had landed him in the hospital on several occasions.

A decree of January 27, 1922 authorizes his retirement from government services and the administration of his retirement benefits due to disabilities contracted while in government service beginning on December 18, 1920.

At that point in time he had accumulated two years of military service (1907-1909) and ten years of civil service (1910 – 1920). He seems to have lived in Spain after February 1932, at which point he was in Barcelona.

His widow, who lived at 5 Blvd. de la Libération in Chantilly (Oise) from 1952, died December 28, 1954. Her widow’s pension was probably paid to her beginning in 1942.

Oger’s files make only one reference to extra-administrative preoccupations: If an article by the Deputy, Georges Bousset, which appeared in “l’Action Quotidienne” on July 9, 1914, is to be believed, Henri Oger published a brochure in which he proposed the creation, in Indochina, of a linguistics and dialects research bureau, analogous to the Linguistical Survey in British India. He proposed, among other things, to follow the indigenous press and to refute subversive publications. Indeed, in France he founded the “Maison de Tous” which was to be a synthesis of social and civic education. In effect, this Sanskrit student of Sylvain Lévy and Louis Finot at the Collège de France and at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, who was equally influenced by the English school of sociology and the École de la Science Sociale de Paris did much more: Oger was essentially a research scholar who used his service in the army and civil service to satisfy a limitless curiosity in all areas, linguistic as well as literary, regarding the Vietnamese as much as the Europeans living in Vietnam.

This Scientific libido expressed itself in varied ways and numerous projects, always begun, then most often lost. Nevertheless, the most important project, which is alone enough to distinguish Oger, is his field study of the material civilization of the Vietnamese, including sociological aspects. This was a domain which to-date had received little attention, to the extent that Oger proudly claimed that his work was preceded by no-one’s. Based on this very accurate assessment, he allowed his view that the current state of Sino-Vietnamese studies “required especially, the building of vast repertoires and inventories.” In his view, since the conquest, “there had been in Vietnam many too many dictionaries and many too few truly sociological and ethnographic studies.” He thus foresaw:

a) Establishing a technical vocabulary. b) A graphic study of all known tools and instruments and the motions required to use them. c) Monographic studies of Vietnamese families (cobbler, grocer, paper-seller, translator, etc.), including their detailed budgets, their lodgings, clothing, and eating habits, etc., according to the methodology of Le Play and de Tourville. d) Publication of the findings.

¹ Article published in BEFEO LVII, 1970, p.215-217

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Accompanied by a Vietnamese draftsman, Oger covered the streets of Hanoi noting all aspects of family and public life, of commerce and industry, and of the crafts and techniques of the North-Vietnamese people. More than 4,000 documents were collected in this way including descriptions of implements, tools and artisanal motions along with sketches and corresponding technical terms.

One study about which several articles in the “*Dépêche Coloniale*” and the “*Avenir du Tonkin*” had given the public an idea, remained to be published. But, there were no Hanoi printers who were also publishers and no official support could be envisaged. Oger, the soldier 2nd class, barely over 20 years old, didn’t see himself as beaten. He raised 2000 piasters from 20 dauntless individuals. With this cash he hired an ad hoc group of 30 wood engravers and installed them in two workshops in the Vu-Thach pagoda.

After innumerable difficulties (particularly, the impossibility of running the wooden engraving plates, which had warped in the humidity, under the rollers of the mechanical presses), he had to fall back on traditional Sino-Vietnamese methods in full summer heat. These constituted pressing by hand, onto the inked engraving plates, sheets of special, form-made paper from the artisans of Lang Buoi, the papermaking village. Thus was printed, within the framework of the “Documentary Archives of Art, Ethnography and Sociology of China and Indochina” the “General Introduction to the Study of the Craft and Techniques of the Annamite People.”

It comprised two volumes: the first, in-quarto with 33 plates; the second an album of seven hundred folio plates (65X42) with 4000 drawings, layouts and prints.

The work was probably finished in 1909 and appeared, undated, with Geunther, 68 rue Mazarine (Vie) and Jouve et Cie., 15 rue Racine (Vie) as publishers. Since the work was printed in Vietnam and not submitted for legal registration in France, no copy was placed in the Bibliothèque Nationale. Unbelievably, I could find no copies of the work in Parisian libraries. Thanks to the understanding of the Vietnamese authorities, I was able to have a photocopy of copy number 10511 from the former library of the Government of Cochinchina. Using a microfilm created by the Thai Thuc Hô Company in Saigon, the École française d’Extrême-Orient was able to obtain from the photographic service of the C.N.R.S. a reconstruction of this work, until now unfindable. This is just the beginning of a vast inquiry which, alas, has not been pursued.

Written in a mindset that was too technical and too happily contemptuous of popularization, the work couldn’t be expected to receive any favorable judgments at its release neither from the metropolitan public nor from the Vietnamists who were mostly interested in philology, archeology and folklore. The author himself was resigned to only being understood by “two old missionaries living the life of an Annamite.”

Currently, the work merits being re-evaluated and studied for two reasons. First, because it represents an act of faith in the inherent value of research, and an act of will on the part of a researcher working in an indifferent or even hostile environment. Secondly, and most importantly, because better than photographs, it captures numbers of gestures and techniques that the acceleration of historic change in contemporary Vietnam has made disappear.

