Capturing time and place

One of the most difficult things to achieve by simply reading is to get an accurate picture of the time and place we read about, especially if the time and place are far removed from us. I remember that my first reading of an Indonesian novel let me to picture a Jakarta in my mind that could not have been more different than this vibrant Indonesian city. Like most recipients of the picture postcards discussed in this book, too had never been to Southeast Asia and had no idea what to make of what I read. I had only been able to get a more accurate idea of Jakarta when I first went there. For many in the past, and still at present, their first introduction to far off places was and is by means of picture postcards. The cards convey, or try to convey what travelers and expatriates experienced on their journeys and of the places they sojourned. Even now with all the images readily available on the internet, we still tend to send pictures home because they capture what we really saw in a much more private and immediate way than any website can do.

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Picture Postcards of Cambodia
(1900-1950)
Bangkok: White Lotus
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Mr. Montague is quite rightly surprised that in the past, the wealth of "cheap ephemera", such as cheap postcards, have been dismissed as historical sources in favor of miles and miles of written sources. Indeed, the expression that a "picture can paint a thousand words" is ever so true in this case. In view of the millions of postcards purchased and sent overseas, they form an important source of the way the French saw themselves, the country they occupied and how the French interacted—or not—during important and, this is more significant, during not so important encounters. Looking closely at many cards I get the impression that the French did look at it as they did at "literally 'out of place' in Cambodia. Their European attire and headaddresses, the way they stood and posed were quite the fashion in Paris at the time, but indeed do look odd in the tropical Southeast Asian landscape. Many postcards display pictures of a world now lost in time. The means of transportation, fashion, hair styles and the whole set up of the cities and towns and their streets and parks have all but totally disappeared. However, to look at places in the east with streets almost empty, but for a dogcart or two, and comparing those with the traffic congested reality of today is a wonder in itself.

Banal messages?
Communication between French Indochina and France was not easy especially in the early days. The most touching pictures discussed in the book and displayed in some illustrations are therefore those of huge crowds awaiting the arrival of the mail boat, or sending it off. Living in the Far East far away from home people pine for news of family and friends. A mail boat arrived only every so often and people had to wait for weeks for news from 'home'. The time between sending a message and receiving an answer could amount to 10 weeks so one can only imagine the disappointment when the boat failed to bring a letter or a postcard from loved ones.

Because it was so important, the author pays some attention to the way the mail was operated in French Indochina. Chapter two is devoted to picture postcards from Cambodia, their history, categorization, photographers, editors and publishers and other useful information to place these cards in the right setting. The chapters then continue, as they always seem to do in this kind of books, with the monarchy, palaces etc. Interestingly, they never seem to start with rural life and the ordinary people or sending it off. Living in the Far East far away from home people pine for news of family and friends. A mail boat arrived only every so often and people had to wait for weeks for news from ‘home’. The time between sending a message and receiving an answer could amount to 10 weeks so one can only imagine the disappointment when the boat failed to bring a letter or a postcard from loved ones.

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Pictorial notions of colonial successes
Picture postcards were big business. Quoting Paul Armand, the author mentions that billions of cards were printed and sent before the First World War. For instance, in 1905 a staggering number of 7 billion cards were sent worldwide. (After the War, the number decreased because of the advent of the personal camera and other means of communication becoming available). Also from French Indochina, huge numbers of cards were sent home. To make some sense of the amounts, the book under discussion has no less than 16 chapters that take us through geopolitical contexts, the monarchy and its palaces and administration, to continue with the Khmer people and their arts, religions, rites of passage and Cambodia's archaeological wonders. It gives us a look into a world that has all but vanished.

In the first part of the twentieth century, the French were proud of their achievements in their Southeast Asian protectorate and keen to share them with France and the world. This was not only a French thing. In view of the volumes recently produced on picture postcards from former Dutch insular Southeast Asia, this was a time when photography could and was used as a means for disseminating pictorial notions of European Colonial successes. It may come as no surprise therefore that especially in the early period of picture postcards, many were of an architectural nature and impressed in the mind of the sender and receiver the huge contributions the colonizers had made and were making to civilization and culture.

The author states that for many Cambodian historians in the early 1990s, the era of the French Protectorate of the region amounted to some kind of non-history and they felt that this time, some 90 years (circa 1863-1954), somehow fell out of Cambodian time. They are proven wrong if only because pictures, also those portrayed in the book, show that the French indeed had been there, what they had been doing and how Cambodia had changed because of their presence. Indeed, Cambodia's French history cannot and should not be easily dismissed.

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