“AT 4 PM THE SHIP PULLED in the gangplank and weighed anchor. White handkerchiefs fluttered in the breeze.” As Nguyễn Tường Tam stood on Hải Phòng’s docks in 1927, awaiting a steamship to France, the aspiring writer may have thought of his life to that point as the early chapters of a colonial bildungsroman. Nguyễn Tường Tam was a provincial, born in 1906 in a poor village in Hải Dương province, near enough to the capital city of Hà Nội to know how far away it was. Very bright, he overcame his humble origins and the sudden death of his father (a low-level bureaucrat) to earn a scholarship to Hà Nội’s elite Lycée du Protectorat, after which he found work as a clerk in the capital’s Bureau of Finance. But the young man was restless. Bored and demeaned by his career like his father had been, Nguyễn Tường Tam quit his job and began writing, drawing, painting, and dabbling in the colony’s percolating political life.

In 1927, Nguyễn Tường Tam wrote a short story, “A Dream of Từ Lâm.” Its narrator Trần Lưu, stuck in the drudgery of work for the colonial bureaucracy, meets an old friend whose parents’ death had led him to abandon his career in law for a life of wandering. “I am now a lonely shadow returning home to visit my parents’ tomb,” the friend says; “after that, I’ll be a wanderer. I’ll roam all over the country, traversing the mountains and rivers. I’ll no longer have a home. . . . I intend to find work as I mix with people along the way. That will give me the opportunity both to study and to teach and to examine human nature.” While his narrator finds Utopia in a small village, Nguyễn Tường Tam himself saw France as his best chance of leaving the cul de sac of colonial society. Shortly after his story was published, thanks to a scholarship from the Society for the Encouragement of Western Studies (An
Nam Như Tây Du Học Bảo Trợ Hội), Nguyễn Tường Tam was on his way to the capital of the empire. In some ways, France was just what he had imagined. He ended up in Montpellier, where he earned a science degree for the marketable qualification and because, as he told a friend, "in underdeveloped nations like ours, science is crucial for the work of social reform." But his passion, like many of his generation, was journalism. He briefly enrolled in journalism school but soon realized that "all the necessary things to learn about it were best studied outside the classroom." He learned everything he could about how journalists worked, how newspapers were organized and printed, and how publishing houses were managed and financed. He inhaled France's newspapers and novels, “pondering their craft and how to incorporate it into and transform Vietnamese literature.” He took in plays, concerts, and museums. “He should have studied literature,” his brother would later write, “but the most important thing was that he had graduated from the university of French society, he had seen the face of a progressive and democratic civilization, and he now knew what freedom and equality was.”

But empire’s harsh realities soon intruded on Nguyễn Tường Tam’s journey of self-transformation in France. His scholarship covered only half of his expenses, so he was always broke despite periodic infusions of “a little money to buy books, clothing and food”; his wife (left behind) sold areca nuts to help support his mother while he was away. New arrivals from Indochina kept him immersed in colonial goings-on. During his first months in Montpellier, rival Indochinese political activists came to speak: Bùi Quang Chiếu, an advocate of moderate colonial reform, and Nguyễn Thế Truyền, the leader of a French network of more radical anti-colonial activists. By 1930, politics bitterly divided the city’s once-staid Indochinese student association, whose members now “opened each others’ mail” and “destroyed newspapers or posters that displeased them.” Its February 1930 meeting, raw with news of a failed mutiny of Indochinese soldiers in Yên Bái, was “tempestuous and menacing.” Three months later, a friend of his was deported for protesting in front of the Elysée Palace. By Nguyễn Tường Tam’s return to Indochina in late 1930, he knew very well how porous, even nonexistent, the boundaries between “colony” and “metropole” really were.

As he had before he left, Nguyễn Tường Tam wrote a semi-autobiographical short story after returning to Indochina. The principal literary device of “Going to France” (Đi Tây) is “the ironic and, often, absurdist interplay of notions of universal ‘civilisation’ (văn minh) and local ‘backwardness’
“(lạc hậu)” that he experienced in France. In France, the narrator Lăng Du often feels genuine liberation from colonial society. People speak to and treat him politely, he dodges his status as a colonial subject when he is mistaken for Chinese or Japanese, he drinks too much in cafés, and he enjoys train rides and weekend jaunts in the countryside. But “Going to France” ultimately mocks the conceit of leaving Indochina behind in France. Shortly after his arrival, Lăng Du (which can be translated as “aimless wandering”) is harrassed by “a colonial” on the street and meets a woman whose son is an official in Hà Nội. He spends his days with other “Annamese” preparing recipes from home (using bouillon cubes instead of fish sauce) and scheming how to pay their bills. Letters, telegrams, and newspapers bring news and needed financial lifelines from home. When he moves outside of these networks from what he ironically describes as his “former life,” Lăng Du is less a flâneur than a voyeur, his freedom laced with anomie: he rides the metro aimlessly for hours, ogles women, loiters in parks, and eats alone in the university cafeteria (despite never managing to make it to class). At the story’s end, Lăng Du and a friend have been deported after being mistaken for “members of a group from X Province who had come to Paris to cause trouble.” For Nguyễn Tường Tam and his narrator alike, France—as distant and different as it was—was part of colonial society after all.

Nguyễn Tường Tam wrote “Going to France” in 1935, five years after returning to Indochina. The story’s irony and ambivalence are thus inseparable not only from his French sojourn, but also from how it affected his life after his return. “Many people studied in France then came home,” his brother wrote, “but few of them with such aspiration and determination. It is no surprise that thereafter, Nguyễn Tường Tam became Nhất Linh.” His nom de plume, meaning “One Spirit,” reveals how France had broadened his professional and literary horizons. His French degree got him a teaching job at Hà Nội’s prestigious Thăng Long school. With friends, he formed a publishing house and refashioned a moribund journal on the model of the satirical journals he read in France. The new literary collective, the Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn), published two journals (Phong Hóa and Ngày Nay) that became among the most important publications of late colonial literary and cultural life. Nguyễn Tường Tam also began pursuing a reformist political program that synthesized “classical French republican values of democracy and freedom with the moderate socialist objectives of decreasing social inequalities and promoting social cohesion through participation in the state.” But the same “France” that had broadened his horizons...
soon shuttered his journals and squashed his reformist campaigns. By the late 1930s, he had “abandoned journalism and reform for political agitation,” turning to clandestine anti-colonial activism. Nguyễn Tường Tam’s experience of colonialism, in short, was of a series of unpredictable, often countervailing forces that brought him from colony to metropole and back again, and in doing so transformed his education, his literary work, his journalism, his politics, and how he thought about himself and his world.

*Subjects and Sojourners* is a history of the roughly two hundred thousand people from Indochina who, like Nguyễn Tường Tam, sojourned in France during the colonial era (from the 1850s until the 1950s). People from the region had traveled to France well before colonial rule: Catholic priests and novices, local families of French adventurers, and officials of the region’s imperial states. Beginning in the 1860s, French military interventions and land grabs brought diplomatic envoys seeking to stave off or shape the growing ties between their empires and France. After the consolidation of French rule around the turn of the century, Indochinese officials of the colonial and protectorate regimes came for practicums in public administration and economic development, and members of the region’s royal families came as human spectacles of the Franco-Indochinese partnership. Thousands of Indochinese came to French secondary schools or universities in search of broader horizons or marketable credentials. Others came for the experience and imprimatur of literary, journalistic, and artistic circles, or as tourists seeking their own kind of colonial exoticism. Sojourners were not just elites. Servants and soldiers came to France as part of the region’s first diplomatic embassies. After them came cooks and domestics working for French families; artisans, masons, carpenters, and other laborers at French expositions; and sailors on steamships that linked Europe and Asia. Nearly one hundred and twenty thousand came during the world wars to fight and to work. Political activists from Indochina went to France to pursue their causes and agendas. And as French rule began to collapse, thousands of Indochinese came to France through the networks of the region’s new postcolonial states or as refugees of a devastating war of decolonization.

Nearly all Indochinese who went to France returned home, and their time abroad profoundly marked colonial and postcolonial societies in Indochina after their returns. The Indochinese imperial officials who witnessed the economic and cultural dynamism of fin-de-siècle France became influential proponents of Western-style reform after their returns (some in far-reaching reform movements that the French repressed). French educations shaped
hundreds of Indochinese intellectuals, many of whom assumed leading roles in the region’s professional and scholarly worlds after empire. In France, some Indochinese journalists first learned their vocation, and some artists and writers explored new forms and found markets for their work. Laborers acquired new competencies and found opportunities that transformed their fortunes. Colonial Indochina’s major political movements all extended into the metropole; some Indochinese first discovered politics there, and metropolitan political culture influenced—even transformed—the existing political commitments of others. During Indochina’s war of decolonization from 1946 until 1954, the region’s new postcolonial states extended their political and cultural networks into France as part of their quests for legitimacy and authority. And sojourns in France, finally, shaped Indochinese friendships, relationships, selves, and subjectivities. 

Subjects and Sojourners uses Indochina as a case study of the circulation of colonial subjects through what Gary Wilder calls the French imperial nation-state, a “disjointed political form” in which “republicanism, bureaucratic authoritarianism, and colonialism were internal elements of an expanded French state” that was “simultaneously rationalizing and racializing, modernizing and primitivizing, universalizing and particularizing.” In French colonies, this produced “novel sociopolitical formations that were irreducibly different from those in the West yet were incontestably modern and inseparable from their European counterparts,” in which “subject-citizens confronted the emancipatory and oppressive aspects of both the universalizing and particularizing dimensions of French colonial politics.” The French imperial nation-state, Wilder also argues, “generated corresponding networks of social circulation” in which “colonial soldiers, workers, professionals, and subjects were not simple immigrants” but “a social network that facilitated movement back and forth between the metropole and its colonies as well as between France’s colonial federations.” Wilder thus rejects a conceptual topography of the French empire grounded in an “antithesis between metropolitan republicanism (defined by democracy and civil society) and overseas colonialism (defined by tyranny and racism),” arguing instead that “if colonial government must be understood as continuous with the French state, the metropole must also be understood as the very center of an empire of which it and the colonies were integral parts.”

Many scholars have explored how the French imperial nation-state’s “constitutive contradiction between political universality and particularity” shaped Indochina as a colonial society: what Pierre Brocheux and Daniel
Hémery, in their seminal general history of Indochina, describe as “an ambiguous colonization.” But most, Brocheux and Hémery included, confine “colonial society” to Indochina’s borders. *Subjects and Sojourners* argues that the extension of the French imperial nation-state into Indochina, in turn, extended Indochina’s colonial society into France. Indochinese sojourns in France were both a form of colonial power and one of its most significant unintended effects. They spanned the entire colonial era, and they included the most elite to the most marginal members of colonial society. Moreover, France was by far the most common destination for Indochinese leaving the colony during the colonial era. As such, sojourns in France were a more significant force in the making and remaking of colonial society than those in other places outside of the colony, which were all limited to specific groups of people, in smaller numbers, and for limited periods of time.

*Subjects and Sojourners* argues, in short, that Indochinese sojourns in France were not a departure from colonial society, but one of colonial society’s core structural features: they are best conceived of and studied as a form of human circulation *within* colonial society, rather than outside of it. It thus echoes Sukanya Banerjee’s argument that “the terrain of empire, where the ‘nation’ itself is in various stages of making, unmaking, and nonmaking,” is “a more apt lens for studying beneath, above, and beyond the nation” than either nationalist approaches to the history of Indochina or the transnational and global approaches that have followed them.

*Subjects and Sojourners* challenges how other discrete but intersecting historiographies approach the sojourns of colonial subjects in metropoles. Historians of Europe have long cast imperial metropoles as, in Antoinette Burton’s words, “a site productive not just of imperial policy or attitudes directed outward, but of colonial encounters within.” Her rich portrait of three elite Indians in colonial Britain in *At the Heart of Empire* (1998) advances two arguments. First, she argues that “empire was and is not just a phenomenon ‘out there’ but a fundamental and constitutive part of English culture and national identity at home, where ‘the fact of empire was registered not only in political debate . . . but entered the social fabric, the intellectual discourse and the life of the imagination.’” Second, she argues that the “colonial peoples moving through the United Kingdom” made “Britain at home a multiethnic nation and a site of diasporic movement.” Her ultimate concern is European society, not colonial society: she evokes but does not explore the influence of her subjects’ European sojourns “on regional Indian politics and with it, on ‘national’ Indian history as well.” Historians
of France generally follow this approach. Some scholars superficially subsume the histories of colonial subjects in France into the metropole’s “colonial culture” of advertising, education, and entertainment: an inadvertent scholarly recapitulation of “native village” exhibits at French colonial expositions. Others, meanwhile, consider colonial-era circulations only as origin points for contemporary French society’s postcolonial dimensions and divisions.

In the field of Southeast Asian history, early studies of colonial subjects in metropoles—deeply shaped by that region’s nationalist historiographies—conceptually confine “empire” to the colony. For example, Rudolf Mrazek saw the Indonesian revolutionary Tan Malaka’s time in the Netherlands as the source of a politically-formative dialectic between “the motherland” and “the outside world.” These studies also focus almost exclusively on the political movements that took power after empire. Leftward Journey (1989), an early study of Vietnamese student sojourns in France, betrays its teleology in its title: it casts these sojourns as “a springboard for Vietnamese communists to win a hegemonic position in the movement for Vietnamese national self-determination.” Even Benedict Anderson’s peripatetic, incandescent Under Three Flags (2005), though deeply attuned to imperial networks and transimperial exchanges, remains focused largely on a single iconic political figure. Historians of Southeast Asia have long been interested in the role of human movements in the making of the region (sojourners and migrants from China in particular), and recent studies of the labor circulations of the British Indian Ocean, the “cosmopolitanism” of the region’s colonial-era port cities, and the experience of exile and diaspora (among others) are further deepening a portrait of what Takashi Shiraishi called “An Age in Motion.”

Global and transnational histories of colonial subjects in Europe have, at their best, helped explain political projects, like black internationalism or right-wing authoritarian anti-colonialism, that crossed imperial borders. But they have often overemphasized—and at times fetishized—contact and exchange between future citizens of the Global South, despite this being neither specific to European networks of anti-colonial politics nor their most important structural feature. Michael Goebel’s Anti-Imperial Metropolis (2015), an influential example of the genre, explores interwar Paris as a crucible
of exchanges between (in his regrettable framing) “non-Europeans” from around Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In Paris, he argues, “through contact, networks, and connectivity... later Third World nationalists dreamed up a post-imperial world order” by “the creation of a common anti-imperialist language” that then “prepared the ground for the posterior simultaneity of decolonization” by imbuing postcolonial nationalisms of the Global South with universalist “assertions of ethno-cultural particularity” and “the claim for citizenship.” Like many other global and transnational historians, Goebel has critically weak area knowledge of most of his case studies; he overstates connections and commonalities between discrete political cultures; he inadequately contends with their pluralisms and divisions; and he instrumentalizes a superficial socio-cultural history of migration in service of a political analysis. The flaws of his study, like others like it, stem from a methodology that largely neglects both archival collections outside of Europe as well as sources in “non-European” languages.

Subjects and Sojourners, in contrast to such approaches, is part of an ongoing “respatialization of area studies” that uses “developed competencies such as the linguistic skills, the deep understanding of cultural features as a result of long field-work experience, and the close connection to local academia” to better understand the networks and mobilities that extended colonial societies into other imperial arenas. It holds that the history of Indochinese sojourns in France must be studied first and foremost in the context of Indochina’s history itself. This demands a temporality that spans the entire colonial era, and a commitment to looking beyond well-known individuals to consider how sojourns came from and changed all parts of colonial society. Moreover, in rejecting the idea that the metropole was “a self-contained entity that can be considered apart from the imperial nation,” it also demands a spatially and temporally rigorous conception of “France.” Subjects and Sojourners moves beyond the analytical seductions of Paris into the campuses of Montpellier and Aix-en-Provence, the chic vacation spots of the Côte d’Azur, the gritty docks of Marseille and Le Havre, French Algeria, other parts of Europe, and the steamships and port cities that linked France and Indochina to one other. It focuses closely on more explicitly “metropolitan” contexts and transformations that affected Indochinese in France more than in the colony: the fin-de-siècle rise of the republican state and economy; the upheavals and aftermaths of the Great War; the interwar political culture of republicanism and its seething discontents; and occupation and liberation during the Second World War, among others. In sum, Subjects and Sojourners
seeks to answer—for all of Indochina—Michel Espagne’s call for “a Vietnamese history of France.”

Subjects and Sojourners employs “Indochinese” as an analytical version of what Gayatri Spivak calls a “strategic essentialism”: an ethno-racial category employed not ontologically but tactically. “Indochinese,” as Christopher Goscha has shown, became a meaningful identity both because of and beyond the French empire’s legal and racial categories, much as “Indian” or “West African” did in other imperial contexts. But my use of this term is emphatically not to claim its primacy over the colonial era’s other ethno-racial categories and identities (such as “Cochinchinese,” “Annamese,” “Tonkinese,” “Vietnamese,” “Khmer,” “Lao,” “métis,” or other). I use it instead almost grammatically: to explore sojourns that, because they spanned all colonial society, benefit—even demand—being studied together. For example, it helps explore how the “Annamese” emperor Bảo Đại and the “Khmer” king Sisowath both sojourned in France as “monarques Indochinois,” or how “Tonkinese,” “Cochinchinese,” and “Khmer” served in the Great War as “tirailleurs Indochinois.” Similarly, despite their many differences, each “Indochinese” whose history this book explores was a “sojourner”: “an individual who spends an unspecified period of time in a new, different or unfamiliar environment” for a “moderate length of time . . . with the intention of returning ‘home’ . . . whose motives are specific and goal-oriented.” The genealogy of “sojourner” as an analytical category for specifically Asian forms of circulation, particularly its stress on choice and agency, makes it preferable to “temporary migrants,” “circular migrants,” or other such concepts in migration studies.

Colonial society’s diversity and complexity, however, did not disappear on the steamship journey to France. Subjects and Sojourners employs a range of other analytical categories to move beyond the flattening effects of both the status of “colonial subject” and the era’s ethno-racial categories and identities. It employs “non-Indochinese” ethno-racial categories when analytically helpful, such as when exploring the presence of “Tonkinese” in student sojourns assumed to have been wholly “Cochinchinese,” or when tracing the rise of the region’s national toponyms as lived realities. But more importantly, the people who fill the pages of Subjects and Sojourners do so as monarchs, imperial officials, students, journalists, writers, actors, painters, musicians, entrepreneurs, sailors, soldiers, domestics, artisans, factory workers, and others. Social categories like these are not only more analytically precise, they also often best reflect how the people explored in this book thought of themselves. As demographically and socially broad as Indochinese sojourns in
France were, they remained deeply uneven in two critical ways: they emerged from and shaped Indochina’s Vietnamese regions far more than its Khmer or Lao regions, and they were overwhelmingly male. Those Khmer, Lao, and women who did sojourn in France are part of this book, but their small number means that they inevitably have a smaller place in its pages. Further, except for a small handful of people from powerful families, Indochina’s upland communities were not a part of these colonial-era sojourns. Like most forms of colonial power and socio-cultural transformation in Indochina, French sojourns both reflected and reinforced a disparate, differentiated colonial society.

*Subjects and Sojourners* is in part a synthesis and interpretation of a body of literature on the history of Indochinese in France that has grown steadily in scope and sophistication. It owes much to seminal early studies of Indochinese political movements in France by Daniel Hémery, Thu-Trang Gaspard, Scott McConnell, Đặng Văn Long, and Sacha Sher; to more recent works of social, cultural, and literary history by Mireille Le Van Ho, Liêm-Khê Luguern, Solène Granier, Kimloan Vu-Hill, Giang-Huong Nguyen, and Nguyễn Hữu Sơn; and to a growing body of memoirs and memory projects. However, *Subjects and Sojourners*—the first comprehensive history of Indochinese in France—engages with a much broader range of Vietnamese-language sources than existing studies: these include travelogues (*du ký*), memoirs (*hồi ký*), newspapers (published in France and in Indochina), fiction, and secondary literature. Although I do not read Khmer or Lao, many of the (few) primary sources from those regions of Indochina that are relevant to this book are in French, whether originally or in translation; for a small number of crucial sources in Khmer or Lao, I rely on studies by other scholars. *Subjects and Sojourners* also makes greater use of colonial-era materials in archives in the former Indochina (Vietnam National Archives centers I–III) than do other related studies.

*Subjects and Sojourners* also draws heavily from a remarkable documentary collection for the study of Indochinese in France essentially untouched by other scholars. The catalogued portions of the archives of the Service de liaison avec les originaires des territoires français d’outre mer (SLOTFOM), the final bureaucratic incarnation of the surveillance apparatus that oversaw colonial subjects in France, contain mostly police documentation on “subversive” incidents, organizations, and movements. Many scholars have used these materials to write the histories of anti-colonial movements. However, section XV of SLOTFOM, still uncatalogued and unexplored at the publication of this book, contains nearly three hundred boxes of biographical dossi-