Abstract

Western visitors to Saigon during the colonial period described the city as the “Pearl of the Far East” or the “Paris of the Far East.” Like Paris, Saigon had its own Notre Dame Cathedral, Opéra, Hôtel de Ville, broad boulevards, and elegant cafés. And like Paris, it had its own labouring classes and dangerous classes: rickshaw pullers, itinerant merchants, vagrants, domestic servants, petty thieves, and prostitutes, among others. These groups constantly ran afoul of the law, which made the municipal policeman the colonial official who knew the urban poor best. This talk discusses the value of colonial police records for writing the history of the urban poor in Saigon. It explores issues of population change and crimes of poverty in the city during the colonial period; the relationship that developed between French criminology and physical anthropology; and the ways in which certain police records might be fruitfully compared to ethnographic texts.

Biography

Haydon Cherry is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at Yale University. Originally from New Zealand, he studied Southeast Asian Studies (B.A. (Hons.)) and History (M.A.) at the National University of Singapore before arriving in the United States in 2004. He has published an article on the history of archaeology in Vietnam in the Journal of Vietnamese Studies and has another forthcoming on the conditions of Saigon’s working poor during the French Indochina War. He is currently completing a dissertation titled “Down and Out in Saigon: A Social History of the Urban Poor, 1858-1939.”