

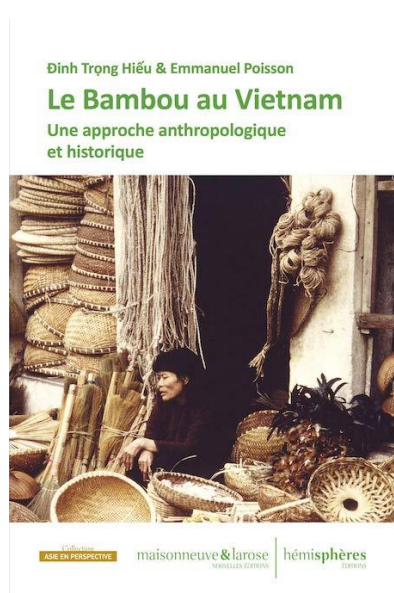
## BOOK REVIEW

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### EVERYTHING ON BAMBOO

Frédéric Thomas

**Đinh Trọng Hiếu & Emmanuel Poisson. Le bambou au Vietnam. Une approche anthropologique et historique [Bamboo in Vietnam. An Anthropological and Historical Approach]. Maisonneuve & Larose, 2020. 287 p. ISBN: 2377010644**



**Abstract.** The review is given for the book “Bamboo in Vietnam. An Anthropological and Historical Approach” by Đinh Trọng Hiếu and Emmanuel Poisson. The book is richly illustrated with old engravings and lithographs. It is a kind of encyclopedia that describes in detail the whole range of uses of bamboo in the life of the Vietnamese.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, bamboo, anthropology, history, tools, musical instruments, craftsman.

Đinh Trọng Hiếu and Emmanuel Poisson have written a beautiful book on the anthropology and history of bamboo in Vietnam. It contains 160 engravings relating to the uses of bamboo, taken from Henri Oger's book *Technique du peuple Annamite* (Paris, Geuthner, 1909) and 12 exceptional lithographs from the Gia Định School of Art from the 1930s; secondly, because the authors bring together their skills as anthropologist and ethnobotanist, in the case of the former, and historian, in the case of the latter, to show the importance of bamboo in the material culture of Vietnam and thus in its history. The eclecticism of the sources, from imperial chronicles (the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* in particular), to direct descriptions of bamboo tools, via family oral transmissions (a recipe for *tương* from Hiếu's mother), finally contributes to the originality of the work.

The first part of the book is organised into 5 chapters. After an introductory chapter presenting the different species and varieties of bamboo, their multiple uses, their omnipresence in Vietnamese landscapes and the antiquity of their use – the first archaeological traces of bamboo use by the men of the region go back to the Hoabinian period (9000 years B.C.) –, chapter 2 dwells at length on the terminology allowing to describe the different species and varieties of bamboo, the different parts of the plant as well as the vocabulary associated with the different uses of

bamboo. Each type of use requires the craftsman to choose one variety rather than another, one part of the fibre (internal or external), etc. For example, old people will prefer *Bambusa ventricosa* (trúc ãi gà) with a number of internodes multiple of twelve to make their old-age stick; and for the manufacture of paddles, old, flexible bamboo will be necessary: “The first quality of a paddle is to be flexible, it is this flexibility that makes the movement of the paddle follow the rhythm of walking while imparting a momentum. Only the base part of an old bamboo, which is hardly more than two metres long, is suitable for making this instrument” (p. 35). By multiplying these examples, the authors show how the development of an extremely diversified and ingenious craft based on bamboo has developed an in-depth knowledge of the plant, its physiology and its morphology.

Chapter 3 is a systematic description of the different uses of bamboo, starting with the uses of live bamboo (defensive hedges, typhoon and flood hedges). We learn that bamboo hedges protecting villages in the past were planted on small embankments so that the rhizomes did not spread, thus concentrating the shoots in one place and making the hedge impenetrable very quickly. The uses of bamboo simply cut in the form of a trunk or hollowed out tube are innumerable (rafts, gourds, norias, piping, framing...). To make *còm lam* (glutinous rice cooked in a bamboo tube), use *Dendrocalamus*, a bamboo with a not too thick culm wall, perfect for cooking (p. 57), and for your knife handles the small yellow bamboos called trúc ãi gà are preferable as they are solid and foolproof. The bamboo musical instruments are as varied as they are amazing, the Sédangs' hydraulic carillon in particular, of which the authors give a very nice description (p. 65–67), accompanied by an in situ photograph dating from 1977 by Jean-Dominique Lajoux.

Chapter 4 analyses the values and symbols attached to bamboo. Bamboo can be synonymous with righteousness, the image of a good man, but it is also synonymous with greed. The ambivalence of this symbolism is due, according to the authors, to the fact that bamboo is both a noble and a trivial material.

The last chapter of the first part focuses on the theme of “bamboo and power”, i.e. essentially on the political uses of bamboo. The authors approach this theme through three entries: imperial rituals, imperial bureaucracy and military uses. They show how bamboo, both standing and cut, is an essential material of power. The construction, protection and maintenance of dykes, for example, were directly dependent on bamboo; the imperial post (Trạm) with its ordinances, its riders, its relays and the innumerable decrees describing the techniques of sealing on bamboo to guarantee imperial secrets would not have been the same without the bamboo tube, not to mention the innumerable battles, maritime or land, won by the Vietnamese armies at all times thanks to the deadly and humiliating power of the bamboo stakes, bamboo cangue, bamboo cage... The authors finally show that bamboo is not only part of the daily life of the Vietnamese as a building material and a central component of countless everyday techniques, but also in the very existence of politics and the state.

Readers will enjoy the second part like a book of curiosities. Entirely devoted to the reproduction and presentation of woodcuts from Henri Oger's book and lithographs from the Gia Định School of Art, as has been said, one learns how to cut, split and shape bamboo, how to ride an escarpolette on village feast days, how to build drains, how to castrate a dog by enclosing it in bamboo mats (not recommended), how to scoop out a rice field or dry rice cakes on bamboo racks... What stands out from the multiplicity of these uses and the diversity of tools and utensils made of bamboo is, of course, the immense modularity of the material. Indeed, is there any other

material capable of such modularity? The authors answer plastic, only plastic can indeed claim to beat bamboo in terms of the diversity of its uses. This is a profound and meaningful remark, as one could not better describe the place of bamboo in the history of Vietnam: it is precisely because the people of these lands benefited from such a modular material very early in their history that they were able to mobilise this material to live, grow and develop, both in everyday life and at critical moments in the country's history.

This observation is reminiscent of the view that the geographer Pierre Gourou, quoted by the authors, had of Vietnam and its neighbours as “plant civilisations”. Gourou thus sought to synthesise a certain number of important contributions of French human geography of the time to explain the relationship between man and the environment. Heir to Vidal de la Blache, Gourou was a master in the mobilisation of the concepts of “genre de vie”, “possibilism”, “techniques of production”, “techniques of management” and “landscape efficiency” to explain these civilisational facts that link humans to their living environment and that require us to go beyond the frontier between nature and culture in order to understand them in their essence. Long criticised for its political conservatism, based on the anchoring of humans in their environment, this way of giving the environment a predominant place in the understanding of human history is now being revived under the name of environmental history. Without explicitly claiming to be one, the present work, by making bamboo a key element of Vietnamese plant landscapes and of the history of this region, moves in this direction. It goes beyond a classical anthropology of Vietnamese material culture and suggests in its own way to revisit the history of Vietnam through the prism of an environmental history that gives its full place to the plants, animals, ecosystems and climates that have made the history of this country as much as the people.

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