

# READING & MISREADING

---

From Temple of European Knowledge to Public Space of Vietnamese Modernity  
and Social Life, 1919-1941

Cindy A. Nguyen

Ph.D. Candidate, History Department University of California, Berkeley

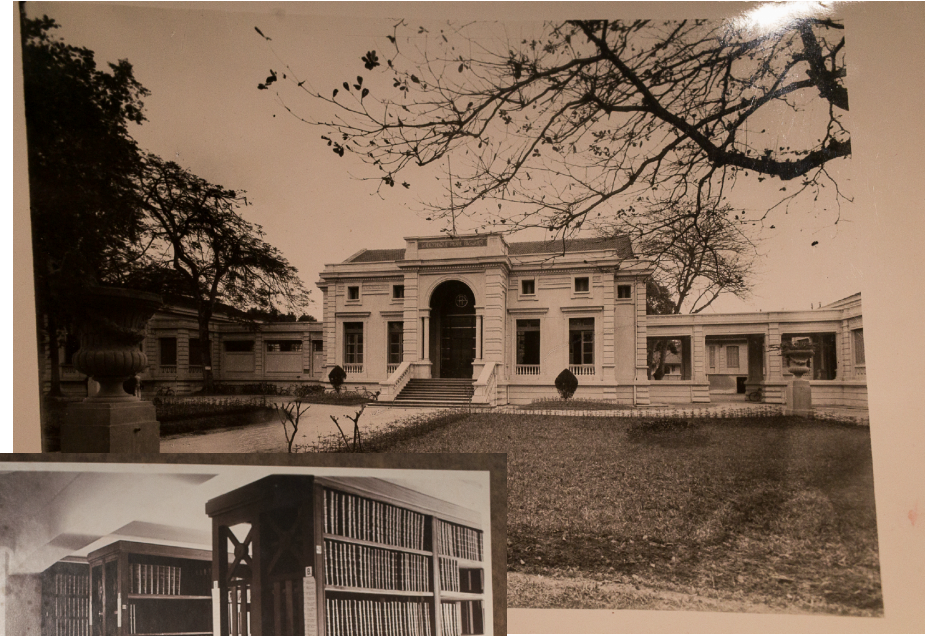
Presentation & Slides: [www.cindyanguyen.com](http://www.cindyanguyen.com) | [cindynguyen35@berkeley.edu](mailto:cindynguyen35@berkeley.edu)





“The colonialist who seeks to join the study of European intellectual movements but could not find it here.. will be grateful to this young, audacious and artistic young man [Paul Boudet] for building in the heart of Tonkin a small temple consecrated for the cerebral efforts and which while serving as a storage of the historical treasures of the colony, permits French in exile to connect with the spirit of universal knowledge.”

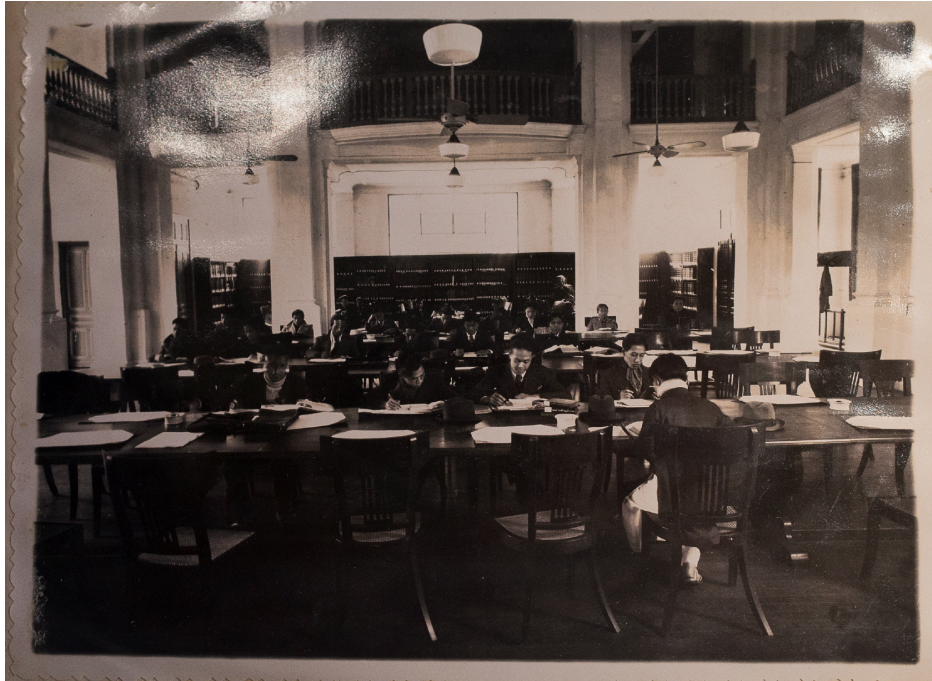
- *Courrier d'haiphong* November 6, 1920



BIBLIOTHÈQUE CENTRALE DE L'INDOCHINE  
MAGASINS À PÉRIODIQUES

---

# Central Library Reading Room



---

# Structure of Presentation

*Central Library Reading Room 1919-1941*

1. Who?

2. How?

3. What?





# Who?

Bibliothèque Pierre Pasquier

N°

M. Nguyen Van Huyên  
Professeur au Lycée  
du Protectorat

Adresse Voie 220, Villa  
(Hanoi)

Biography of a Library User: Access and Control

Après avoir pris connaissance du règlement, est autorisé à fréquenter la  
Bibliothèque Pierre Pasquier.

Hanoi, le 9-12-1935

Signature du Titulaire,

Le Directeur p.i.

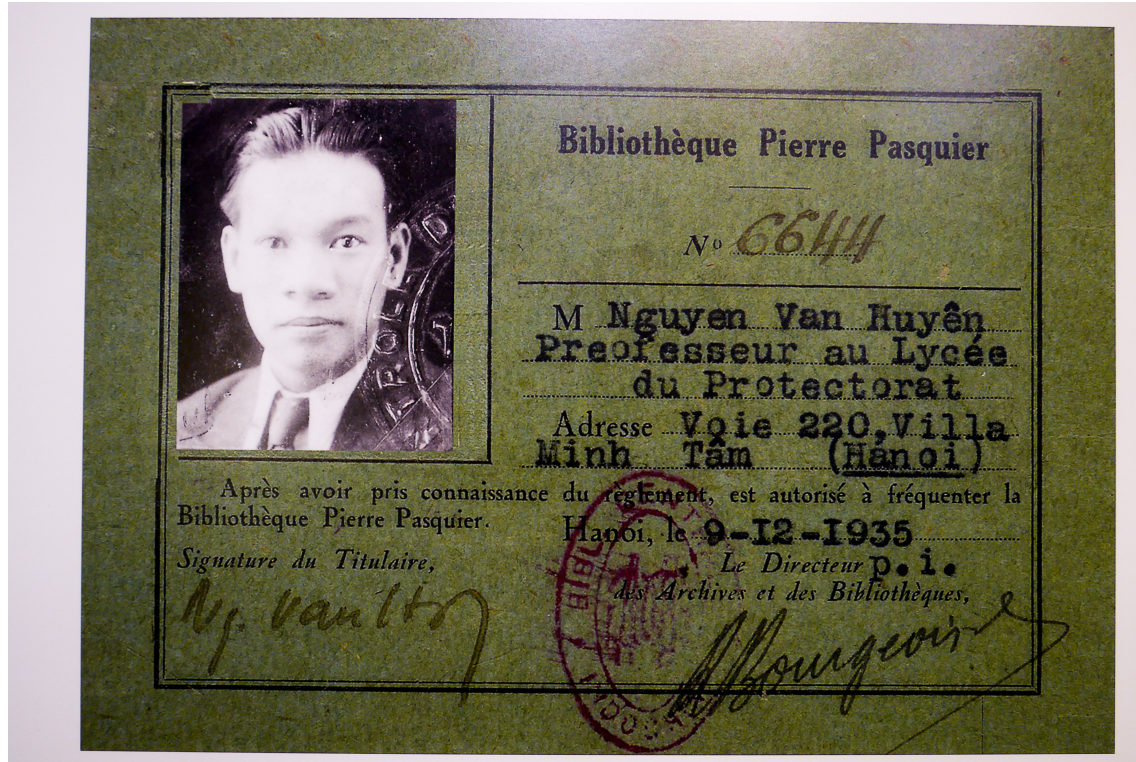
des Archives et des Bibliothèques,

*Ng. Van Huyên*

*Mourgeon*

# Access

1. Literacy in French, Chinese, or quốc ngữ (Romanized Vietnamese)
2. Employment or education
3. Proximity to library – generally urban or administrative center (Hanoi, Saigon, Haiphong, Phnom Penh, Hue)



---

# Value of Reading and Access

Reader Phạm Thế Ban:

“I am one of those who love reading. Having acquired some notions of complementary studies, I have come to understand that which is called reading, the advantage it offers and the pleasures one experiences while reading.

**I want to expand my understanding with new knowledge, which is why I devote myself to reading.** However, interesting books are not at my disposal...I ask you, then, to allow me to visit the central library and to borrow the books by making me an entry card and a lending card.”



# Control

## Controlling Reading, Controlling the Reader Body

- Books as a “public good” and shared resource
- Culture of reporting, consequences, recompense
- Vision of ‘modern’ and ‘public’ space

(1) Toute demande doit être accompagnée d'une pièce attestant le domicile du demandeur, par ex. une quittance de loyer.


profession étudiante du P.C.B.  
demeurant à Hanoi, rue des Paniers no 95  
désireux de participer au prêt à domicile des ouvrages de la Section de prêt dépendant de la Bibliothèque Pierre Pasquier, déclare avoir pris connaissance du règlement du 28 Avril 1922 et m'engage à me conformer aux prescriptions de celui-ci, en particulier, à celle qui concernent le remplacement des livres perdus ou détériorés.

Hanoi, le 4 Janvier 1941  
Signature : Tuyet Van

*Imp. An-Tinh Hanoi*

*Carte d'étudiante  
année scolaire  
1940-1941  
no 87*

Vu :  
Le Directeur des Archives  
et des Bibliothèques,  
*[Signature]*



“I declare that I have understood the rules and will conform to their prescriptions, in particular, to replace books lost or damaged.”

# Reading & Misreading

Case Study: Reading in the Hanoi Central Library Reading Room

# Demographics: Rise of Vietnamese Readers and Decline of French Readers

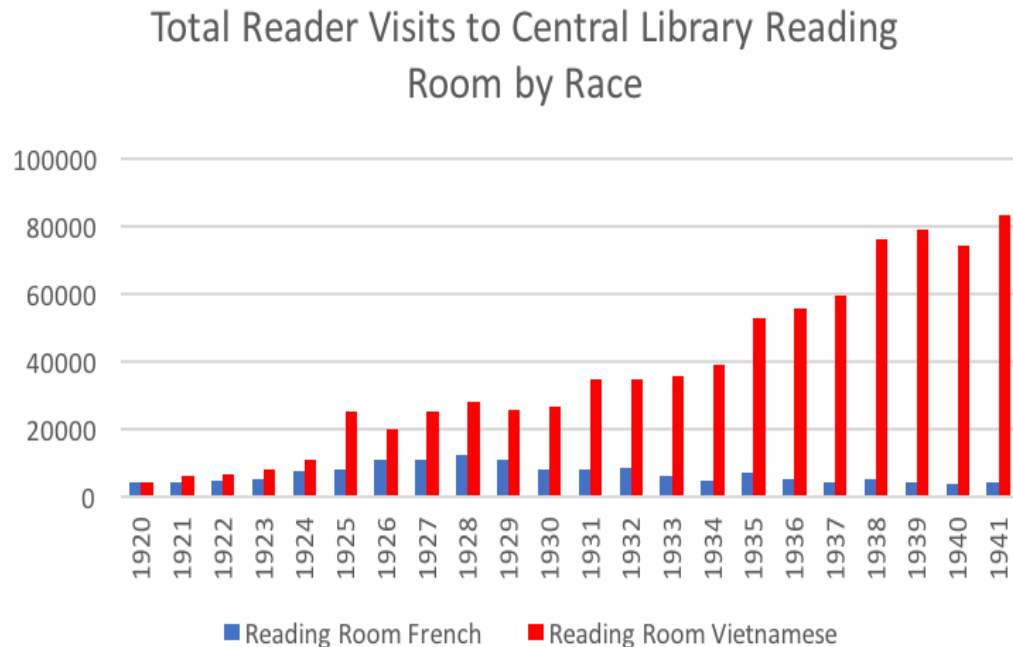


Figure 1. French visits to Reading Room decline from 1929 to 1941 while Vietnamese visits to the Reading Room exponentially increase from 1924 to 1941.

1929: 25,815 Vietnamese users v. 10,549 French visited the Reading Room

1936: 55,888 Vietnamese, 7,028 French

1941: 87,397 Vietnamese, 3,860 French

Source: Annual Statistics 1920-1941 Central Library Hanoi



# CENTRAL LIBRARY

## Comparative Use Statistics 1931

### READING ROOM (1931)

- **51,392 annual consultations - Compared to French cities Lyon (63,362), Rouen (30,545), Marseille (25,000)**
- Collection size: 70,000 books
- Open daily 9AM to 10PM (Closed Sunday afternoons, Monday mornings, holidays)

### LENDING SECTION (1931)

- 60,000 annual loans
- Collection size 10,000 books
- Open daily 9AM to 8PM (closed Sunday morning, holidays)

Source: 1931 Annual Report Archives and Libraries of  
Indochina

---

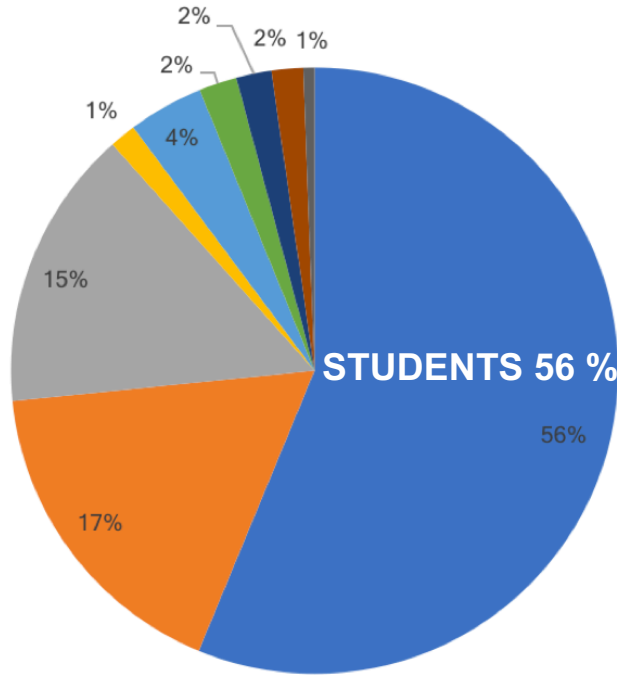
# Hierarchy of Knowledge: Leisure Reading VS. Serious Reading

“Readers often come to the library, stake out their seats by placing a book there and leave to lunch. There is nothing more shocking than to see a great number of unoccupied seats [due to readers staking them out], while others readers are forced to stand next to windows or the lockers due to lack of space.”

- “Bibliothèques Publiques [Public Libraries]” November 28, 1935, *L’annam nouveau*

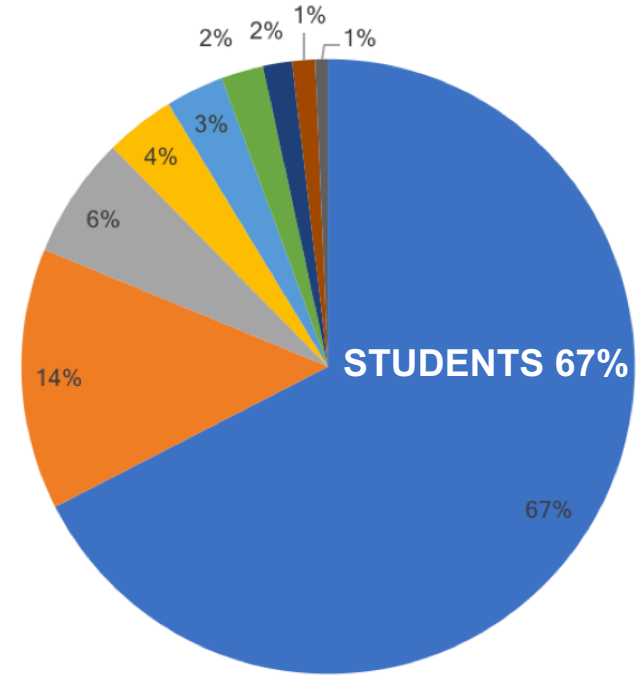
# Percentage Breakdown of Vietnamese Reader Cards

1937 Vietnamese Readers with Central Library Permanent Reader Card



1937

- Students of higher education/ university education
- Adminsitrators (not students)
- Students of post-graduate education
- Teachers
- Employees of private or commercial industries
- Traders or industrialists
- Journalists
- Without a profession, received degree from higher education
- Without a profession, received a degree of post-graduate education



1941

Student Growth: 11% in 4 years





---

# Vietnamese Visions for the Library and Demands for Improvement

“How does one evaluate a country? Not based on superficial institutions in order to justify heavy taxes. Nor does one evaluate an administration based on the number of public services. Instead, one praises a government founded on a few institutions thoughtfully organized rather than a large number of superficial and ineffective institutions.”

- Hy Tông, “La crise des salles de lecture à Hanoi [The crisis of the reading room in Hanoi]” December 11, 1932, *L’annam nouveau*

# THE NEED TO EXPAND THE CENTRAL LIBRARY

“The overseer of the Reading Room has found on various occasions indigenous readers and even French were forced on busy days to leave without using the resources of the library, having not found a place to sit. There is no better argument for demonstrating the necessity and extreme urgency for expansion.”



---

# CONCLUSION





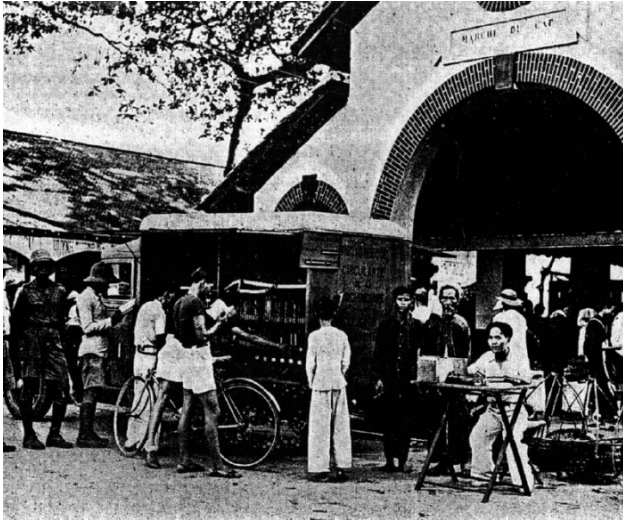


[cindynguyen35@berkeley.edu](mailto:cindynguyen35@berkeley.edu)

Website: [www.cindyanguyen.com](http://www.cindyanguyen.com)

# APPENDIX

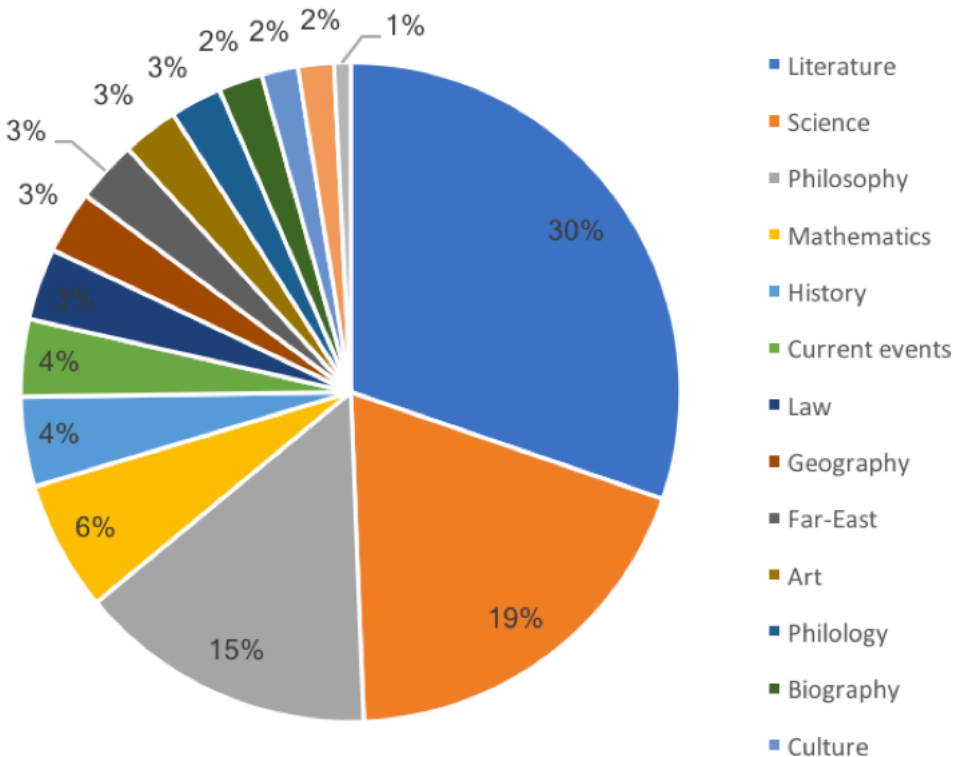
# Digital Humanities, Data on Readers, Collections, Circulation



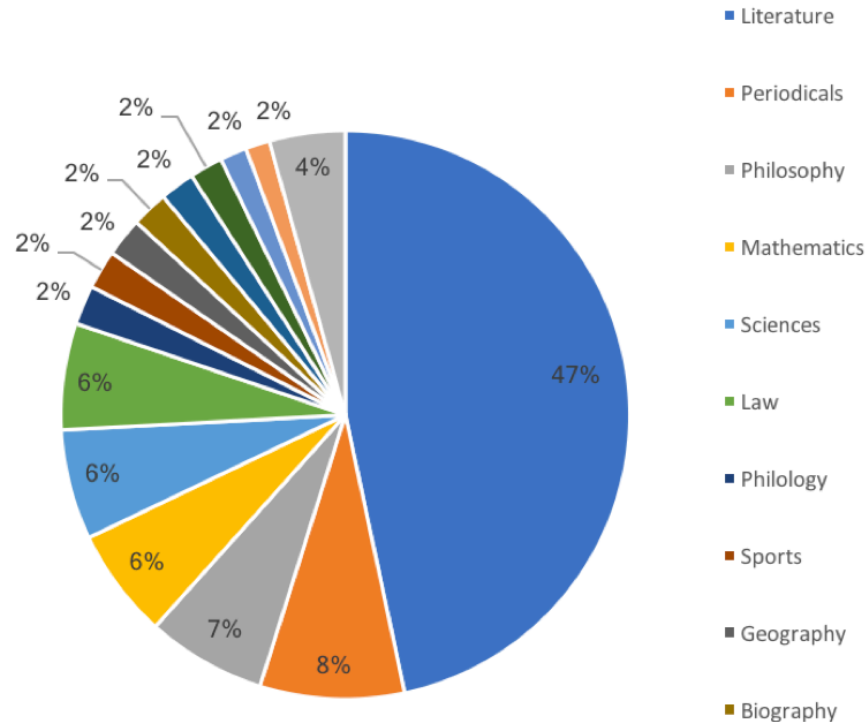


# Reader Preferences for Literature

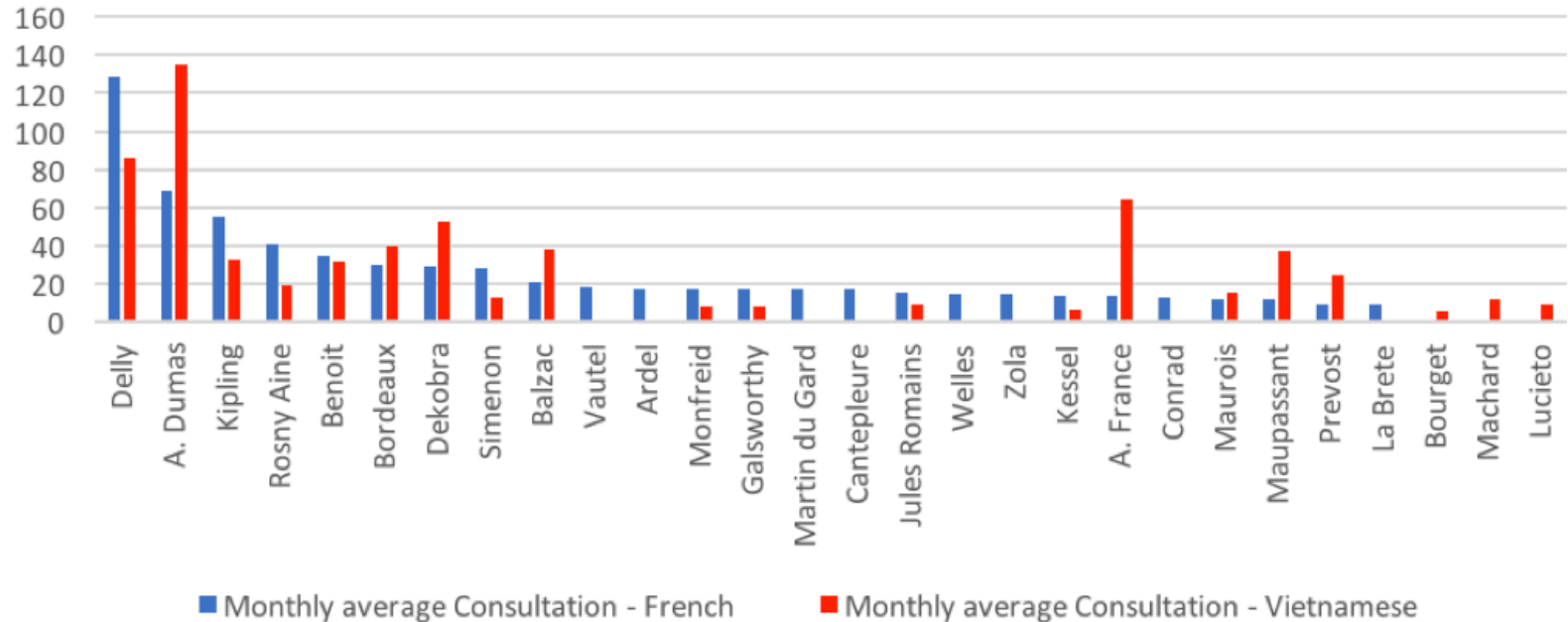
Percentage of Works Consulted by Category in Reading Room of Central Library August 1924-June 1925



Percentage of Works Consulted by Category in Reading Room of Central Library June 1940-May 1941



## Monthly Average Consultation of Novel Authors May 1938 - May 1939 Lending Section Central Library



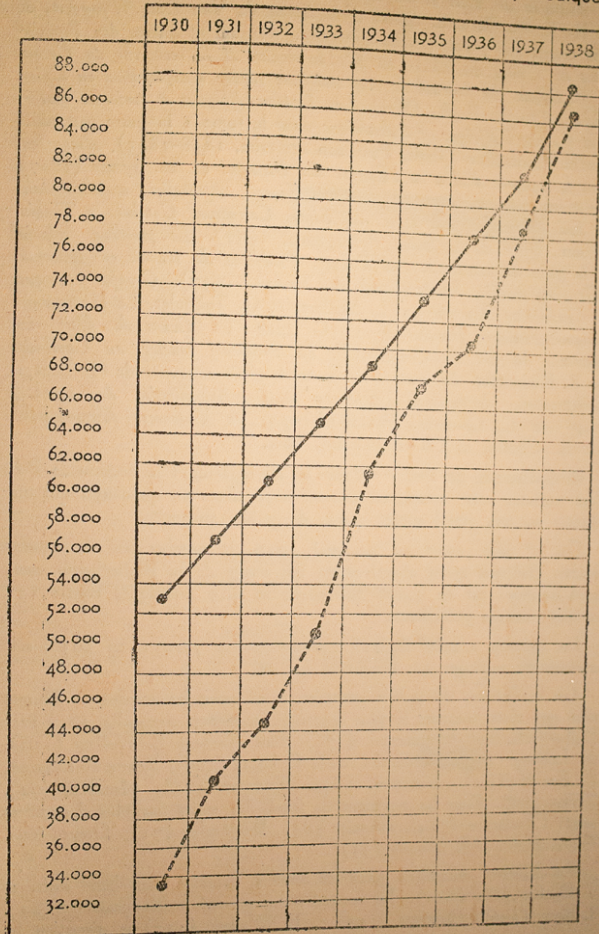
# READING ROOM STATISTICS

June 1935-  
May 1936

- Average Number of Readers in One Day: 229
- Highest Recorded Number of Readers in One Day: 403  
(390 Asian, 13 European)
- 531 new reader cards issued 1935-1936
- Total number of reader card 7,073 readers
- Collection size: 78,073 books
- Number of Chairs: 84 (increased from 60)

Source: 1936 Annual Archives and Libraries of Indochina  
Report

Graphique des ouvrages en rayon  
(trait plein) et des livres lus (pointillé) non compris les périodiques



## Central Library Reading Room

Solid line: number of works on the shelves (excluding periodicals)

Dotted line: number of books read

Source: 1938 Archives and Library Report