Ce n'est pas une vie que de ne pas bouger

When a person today is asked, "Who was Alexandre Yersin?" almost no one recognizes the name. Yet this Swiss-born researcher was a preeminent figure whose life story reads like an adventure novel.

Alexandre Yersin was a bacteriologist, physician, researcher, adventurer, ethnologist, seafarer, farmer, geographer and astronomer. In brief, he was a restless seeker with unbridled curiosity and blessed with an exceptional intelligence, who wholly devoted his life to science.

In 1894 as plague was raging in Hong Kong, in just three weeks' time this 31-year old was able to identify and isolate the responsible bacillus pathogen, using samples from the *buboes* (inflamed lymph nodes) that formed on corpses. Despite enormous possibilities for success that might have followed, he preferred to withdraw into the jungles of South Vietnam.

Alexandre Yersin was born in Switzerland in 1863 to a Puritan family in the French-speaking town of La Vaux (VD). After his father's early death, his mother opened a finishing school for girls. The young Alexandre inherited his father's interest in natural history and began to collect and study the local insect population.
His medical studies began in Lausanne, then Marburg (Germany) and finally his training was formally completed in Paris. He applied for a position with Dr. Louis Pasteur, which allowed the very talented young scientist to work closely within Pasteur's inner circle. Already as a young doctor, Yersin was an exceptional performer, writing his professional thesis on tuberculosis. He eventually became a staff member of the Pasteur Institute, where he partnered with Emile Roux to identify the diphtheria toxin.

In order to work as a doctor in France, he became a French citizen. However instead of pursuing a career in science, he left the Institute after just two years, and in 1880 worked for a year as ship's doctor on a merchant marine vessel of the Saigon-Haiphong line of the French colony Indochina, part of which comprises present-day Vietnam.

Weary of the monotonous work as ship's doctor, he began making research trips to the colony's unexplored interior, first on his own and later on behalf of the French government. He wandered three months through the jungle on foot, studying the people of Moï, during which he became involved in fights. Badly wounded and in severe pain, he instructed natives how to operate on him. In the highlands of Lang Biang, he discovered a marvelous piece of land where, thanks to Yersin, the city of Dalat (Đà Lạt) exists today.

In 1894, plague was raging in Hong Kong. France, a nearby major colonial power, was aiming to improve its reputation and coordinated with the Pasteur Institute to send Yersin to study the plague. France wanted to be first in discovery, particularly to precede Germany or other colonial powers, especially Great Britain. Notwithstanding interference by these competitors, Yersin was in fact the first to discover the plague bacteria, and firmly established his international fame as a scientist. The bacillus was named after him, *Yersinia pestis*.

In Nha Trang, he began production of the serum for vaccination. He tested the vaccine on horses, and injected it into the already infected, resulting in the ability to conquer the plague. In order to provide the essential feed for animals and the necessary financial resources to build and maintain the institute, he annexed an experimental agricultural station. Under his guidance, this research site (which would eventually become the Pasteur Institute in Nha Trang) was focused on the study and treatment of animal diseases, for example cattle plague. From this point on, he was firmly rooted in Asia. Locally he built his "little Switzerland", including a chalet on the hill in Hon-Ba, and imported rubber trees (*Hevea brasiliensis)* from Indonesia, as well as Cinchona trees as a source of quinine.

In 1904, he began the first deliveries of latex to the Michelin Company for the production of rubber tires. With this came significant wealth and he was able to import the first automobile into Asia. He invested his wealth completely into research, which quickly promoted him to near “sainthood” status.

He was the creator of the first “coca-cola” drink, which he allowed to be produced but never patented the formula. Between 1902 and 1904, he led the newly founded Faculty of Medicine in Hanoi. Apart from a few short visits to Paris, he lived a withdrawn existence in close proximity to Nha Trang.

Later he gained proficiency in astronomy, along with studying meteorology which he used to train local fisherman in reading scientific indicators for weather forecasting. By means of a flag system, he could warn the fisherman of impending tropical storms. The older he became, the more he dedicated he became to children. He crafted dragon figures with them, and imported Charlie Chaplin films to screen for them. During the two world wars, he lived in Indochina and watched from a distance as the dramas played out. He died in 1943 in his beloved Nha Trang during a time when Indochina was under Japanese rule. His final resting place is found on a wooded hillside.

The local inhabitants dedicated a temple to him nearby, where they render homage even today. After seizure of power in the area by the communists, all local and street names were renamed. The Yersin roads should have also succumbed, but the population protested against it. Yersin became accepted as a Vietnamese folk hero, and his name, statues and busts still decorate roads and sites in many locations.

While virtually unknown in his homeland, he is admired throughout Vietnam and nearly every child there knows the name of the researcher Alexandre Yersin.